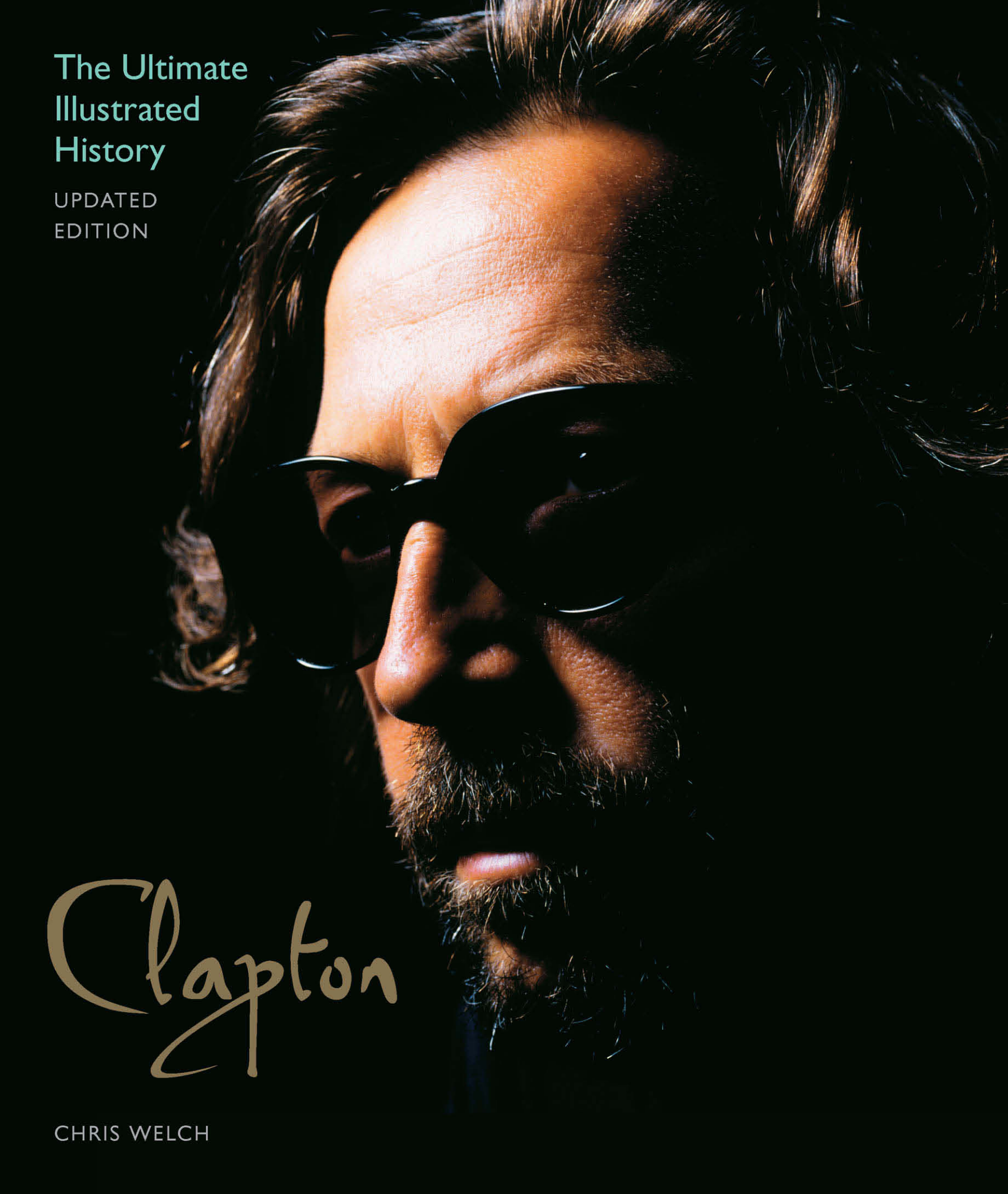

Clapton

The Ultimate Illustrated History

UPDATED EDITION

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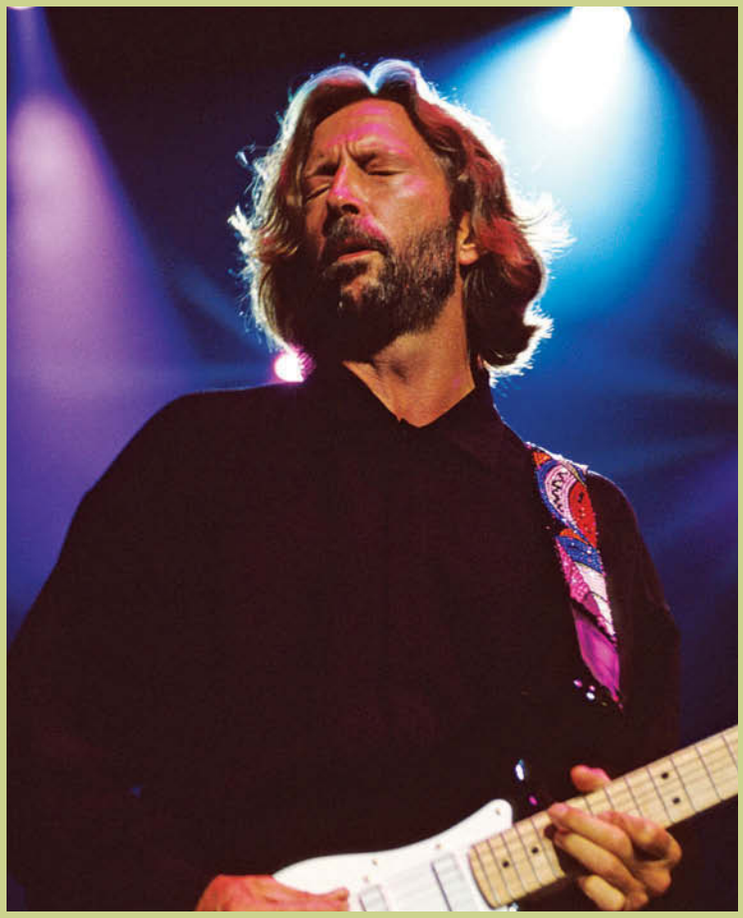

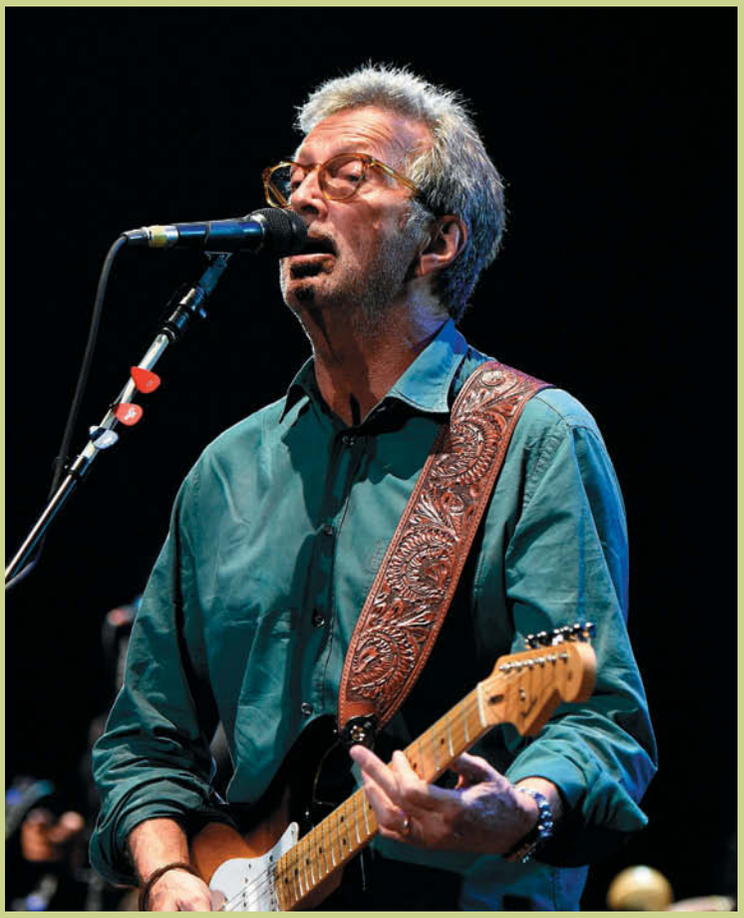

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Chris Welch

Voyageur Press

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On the front cover: Eric Clapton portrait, early 1990s. *Terry O'Neill/Getty Images*
On the frontispiece: Slowhand's hands, 1989. *Luciano Viti/Getty Images*
On the title page, top left: Eric Clapton plays with Cream at the band's first live appearance, at the Windsor Festival on July 31, 1966. *David Redfern/Redferns/Getty Images* Top right: Clapton performs with Delaney and Bonnie in Copenhagen in 1970. *Jan Persson/Redferns/Getty Images* Bottom left: Clapton at the Meadowlands Arena, East Rutherford, New Jersey, on August 7, 1990. *Time Life Pictures* Bottom right: Clapton performs during his Seventieth Birthday Concert Celebration at Madison Square Garden on May 1, 2015. *Kevin Mazur/Getty Images*
On the back cover: Clapton's hybrid Fender Stratocaster "Blackie." *Robert Knight Archive/Redferns/Getty Images*

contents

Author's Note • 8
Riding with Mr. Clapton

Preface • 12
The Crossroads

1. When the Rooster Crowed • 20
Childhood and the Blues, the Roosters, and Casey Jones and the Engineers, 1945–1963

2. A Band of Brothers • 30
The Yardbirds, 1963–1964

3. Where's Eric? • 44
The Yardbirds and the Blues Breakers, 1965

4. Steppin' Out • 54
The Blues Breakers and Cream, 1966

5. Fresh Cream • 66
Cream, 1966–1967

6. Strange Brew • 78
Cream, 1967–1968

7. Goodbye Cream • 108
Cream, 1968–1969

8. Can't Find My Way Home • 124
Blind Faith, 1969

9. Derek is Eric • 144
Delaney and Bonnie, the Plastic Ono Band, Derek and the Dominos, and the Rainbow Concert, 1969–1974

10. "I Play the Guitar . . ." • 166
Solo Career, 1974–1982

11. Autumn Leaves • 200
Crossroads Foundation, Cream Reunion, and Touring with Steve Winwood, 1983–2010

12. Sock It to Me One More Time • 242
Jamming with the Stones; Touring with Jeff Beck; and the Deaths of Jack Bruce, J. J. Cale, and B. B. King, 2010–2015

Discography • 250

Index • 261

author's note

Riding with Mr. Clapton

It was my first week at *Melody Maker* in 1964 when I met a young Mod named Eric Clapton who played guitar with the "latest pop group," the Yardbirds. The weekly British newspaper where I'd managed to secure a job as features writer was known as the bible of the music biz. Established in 1926, it had been covering the world of jazz, blues, and rock for forty years. During that time, its journalists had interviewed every star from Louis Armstrong to Bob Dylan and the Beatles. I was on exalted ground when I entered the Fleet Street office for the first time in October 1964.

News editor Ray Coleman had deadlines in his soul and specialized in exclusive interviews with John Lennon. When he "asked" me to interview the Yardbirds, it was a direct order—get the story or else! So it was with some trepidation that I tracked down the group at a coffee bar in London's Fleet Street. The idea was to get an "angle." Were they breaking up? Were their fans revolting? Was the guitarist going to quit?

As it turned out, the noisy bunch of R&B musicians were funny, charming, and easy to interview. They even had an angle. Singer Keith Relf told me in all seriousness they

Eric Clapton performs with Delaney and Bonnie in Copenhagen, Denmark, in 1969. *Jan Persson/Redferns/Getty Images*

"It's all denied."
—Eric Clapton,
1968

hoped their latest single, "Good Morning Little Schoolgirl," *wouldn't* be a hit. They risked losing all their fans if they "went commercial," they feared. Hooray, I had my headline. The news editor would be pleased, and I'd keep my job.

However, the band's cool dude in the smart Ivy League jacket and fashionable haircut smiled. I suspected he could see right through me. He clearly thought the rest of the band was being silly. Eric Clapton was a dark horse, someone special, a man with a different agenda. He was deadly serious about the blues, and I soon realized he was seriously good at playing the guitar.

It was a joy in the 1960s to be given a mandate to spend all my time digging groups and discovering bright new talents from Steve Winwood to Jimi Hendrix. But the man who held constant appeal and always made wonderful music was Eric Clapton. There he was with the Yardbirds at the Marquee Club, then with John Mayall's Blues Breakers, and onwards to super group Cream. I was fortunate enough to witness Cream's first rehearsal and went to all their small club gigs. Watching Clapton wail the blues in those early days was a treat.

We talked, too, at his Chelsea flat about his ambitions and influences, wreathed in smoke and getting pleasantly stoned. He'd tell me how Cream was breaking up but that nobody should know. "It's all denied," he'd grin.

When the band Blind Faith was proposed, I found myself jamming on drums with Clapton at his country home. We were supposed to be doing an interview, but he soon grabbed a guitar instead: Playing a Buddy Holly tune was more his idea of fun. I didn't get the Blind Faith gig but was in seventh heaven for half an hour. And so I saw Blind Faith in Hyde Park and his shows with Derek and the Dominos when "Layla" was unveiled, and I went on tour with the Eric Clapton Band to experience the wilder side of rock 'n' roll.

It was the greatest thrill to see Cream reunited at the Royal Albert Hall and Madison Square Garden in 2005. Clapton was much the same as when we met for our first interview in years. Older, wiser, but that friendly knowing grin was just as disarming.

It is a privilege to be able to tell his story and look back on his achievements in this book, drawing largely from my own encounters and past conversations. Mr. Clapton always thanks audiences at his shows with a particular salutation. It's one I'd like to offer him now as autumn leaves fall. "God bless you, Eric."

A tribute to one of the most famous guitars in the world—Eric Clapton's Fender Stratocaster nicknamed "Blackie."
Fender Musical Instruments Corporation

preface

The Crossroads

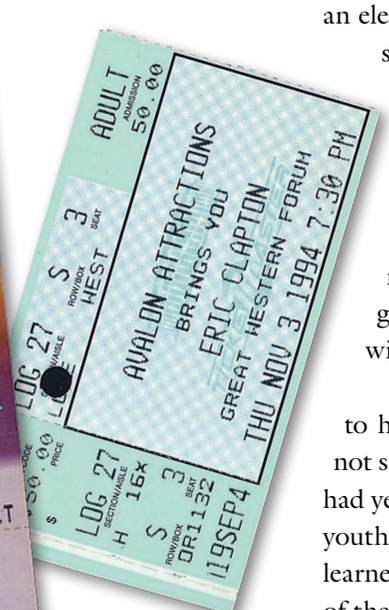
"Now it is time for the most blueswailing Yardbirds!" The compere can barely contain his excitement as he introduces the band one by one. Wild applause greets our heroes as they gird up their guitars. "Here they are—on the lead guitar, Eric 'Slowhand' Clapton!"

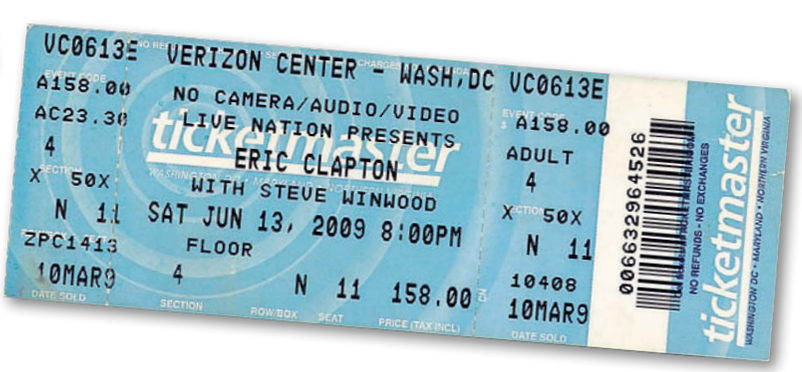
If you wanted a wild night with the hottest R&B bands in England, then London's Marquee was *the* place to hang out. The Animals, Spencer Davis Group, and the Who were just some of the attractions playing nightly during the 1960s at the club on Soho's Wardour Street.

One of the best loved was the Yardbirds. Fronted by blond-haired singer Keith Relf and starring Eric Clapton, they whipped up fans with furiously fast versions of R&B classics. As the band tore into their hottest number, "Too Much Monkey Business," the dark and cavernous Marquee became a sticky sauna, with sweat pouring from the walls and chewing gum stuck to the floor.

The smartly dressed Mods and their girlfriends who patronized the London blues clubs knew their stuff. They may never have seen Chuck Berry or Muddy Waters live, but

Eric Clapton stands in a field in his native Surrey, England, in 1993. *Terry O'Neill/Getty Images*





they recognized R&B when they heard it played with such passion. Most of all they admired the smartly dressed guitarist with the cool haircut who seemed to be a man with a mission. He played the blues with a skill and authenticity so much better than anybody else toting a guitar around town in March 1964. That's the night when Eric Clapton and the Yardbirds were captured "live," recording their debut album at the Marquee.

Keith Relf, blowing his harmonica and straining his vocal cords to be heard above the 30-watt guitar amps, may have been the leader. But to discerning ears the main attraction was Clapton. He exuded an air of authority. Here was a musician who knew he was damn good, patiently waiting for his chance to take care of business.

Yet Clapton never hogged the show. The proof of his brilliance came when he was finally given space to cut loose. Then he'd launch into a stream of sublime improvisations. This calm, adult attitude entranced his followers and suggested he had semimystical powers.

Londoners in those days were divided between those who had seen the guitarist in action and those who had only heard the rumors. "Have you heard Eric Clapton?" Those who confessed they hadn't felt the irritation and jealousy of the excluded.

What was so special about him? Guitarists abounded in pop music and had so for decades. Whether you called the music they played rock 'n' roll or R&B, an electric guitar lay at the heart of the matter. America's pioneers had set the standards, all the way from jazz giants Charlie Christian, Barney Kessel, and Les Paul to blues legends B. B. King, Freddie King, T-Bone Walker, and Chuck Berry.

There were hordes of brilliant session musicians tucked away in recording studios on both sides of the Atlantic, diligently playing all those spine-tingling but anonymous guitar licks on countless hit records. The pop groups of the 1960s also had their own capable lead guitarists, such as Hank B. Marvin with the Shadows, George Harrison with the Beatles, and Keith Richards with the Rolling Stones.

What drew faithful fans to Clapton was the feeling of being summoned to hear the truth. When Clapton played, it seemed like the real thing and not some clumsy, overwrought pastiche. Even so, with the Yardbirds, his style had yet to mature. At the Marquee, he betrayed the nervous, restless energy of youth. But it was in this hothouse environment of small clubs that the guitarist learned his craft. Soon his fame would spread way beyond London to the rest of the world.

Eric Clapton's remarkable journey took him from impoverished "underground" cult figure to rock icon and international celebrity. Along the way he'd devote himself to hardcore blues with John Mayall's Blues Breakers and then devise the world's first super groups with Cream and Blind Faith. He would evolve into a singer with a warm, unpretentious vocal style and develop as a composer whose songs, from "Layla" to "Wonderful Tonight" and "Tears in Heaven," would reach out and touch millions of record buyers.

After the Cream years, when he was thrust into the role of a guitar hero alongside the flashier Jimi Hendrix, Jeff Beck, and Jimmy Page, he would seek to work in a more low-key fashion. He even went so far as to disguise his name, billing himself as Derek and the Dominos. Whether he courted celebrity or not, celebrities tripped over themselves to engage his services. Bob Dylan, John Lennon, George Harrison, Duane Allman, Roger Waters, Elton John, and Phil Collins all wanted Clapton to share a stage or studio with them.

The mystery for many was how a mild-mannered youth growing up in Surrey, England, came to be hailed as the world's greatest white blues artist. As Huddie Ledbetter, better known as Leadbelly, once said, "The white man cannot sing the blues because he's got nothing on his mind." But just as American blues artists such as Muddy Waters had been influenced by Robert Johnson, so the sheer power of the blues—its lyrics, themes, and underlying feelings—could speak to anybody, black or white. And especially to a lonely lad who thought of himself as an outsider.

Whatever the circumstances, Clapton had somehow unlocked the door to blues power—a fact easily communicated to anyone who heard him play from his earliest days. He was certainly in the right place at the right time. His life story parallels the unexpected development of the blues in lands far from the Deep South. It was a phenomenon that had enormous social effects and one that ultimately fired up the rock music that came to dominate twentieth-century pop culture.

Just as Clapton was influenced by his heroes, he, too, became an enormous inspiration to dozens more would-be guitarists trailing in his wake. Many would go on to develop their own careers, notably Peter Green of Fleetwood Mac and Mick Taylor with the Rolling Stones, who both avidly listened to Clapton whenever he played a gig. Even Hendrix said he'd only come to London to launch his career in 1966 if he could meet Eric Clapton. It was a condition his manager, Chas Chandler of the Animals, was only too happy to fulfill.

Clapton has always been a good-humored, polite, friendly, usually modest, and generally happy man with a boyish sense of humor. Fond of practical jokes, unworldly in a disarming way, he charms everyone he meets. The darker side of Clapton could only be explained by the pressures placed on him by a sometimes alarming, stressful outside world.

Clapton had to cope with a confused childhood background even before he came into contact with the wildly disorganized characters that populate the music business. It was only his detachment and inner strength that enabled

Rare early recordings by Clapton, at times joined by Jimmy Page, appeared on the compilation *Guitar Boogie* 1971.

Early cuts by Clapton were released on the three-volume compilation *Blues Anytime* 1968.

Three tracks by Clapton and the Powerhouse appeared on the 1966 compilation *What's Shakin'*.

him to deal with the crazier aspects of being in a band, endlessly on the road. Nevertheless, he would become prone to bouts of suspicion, often unable to trust those around him.

He would retreat into his own world and became cold and detached. Whereas just playing the guitar was once enough to soothe away problems and troubles, in the aftermath of several crises he gradually became drawn into a web of drug and alcohol addiction. Already bruised by his years with Cream, he was shocked by the death of his friend Hendrix in 1970. At the same time he was involved in a complicated love affair with his best friend George Harrison's wife, Pattie Boyd, who he eventually married.

The commercial flop of his cherished song "Layla" (dedicated to Pattie) and attendant problems promoting his new band Derek and the Dominos all added to his general unhappiness. In October 1971, another musician friend, Duane Allman, was killed in a motorcycle accident. It all seemed like an omen to Clapton, attached as he was to the legend of Robert Johnson, who had also died young under tragic circumstances.

For a while he persevered by fulfilling his duties. Clapton performed alongside George Harrison and Bob Dylan at the Concert for Bangladesh in New York in August 1971. But this would prove to be one of his last public appearances as he retreated to his Surrey mansion. Refusing to answer calls, locked away from prying eyes, he rapidly descended into heroin addiction.

It blighted his life during the early 1970s and caused many of his oldest fans to give up on him as a lost cause. But showing enormous resolution and strength of character—and with the help of friends, loved ones, and his manager, Roger Forrester—Clapton returned a stronger, more successful artist than even his more ardent admirers in the 1960s could have imagined.

Recovering from his heroin habit, he made a historic appearance at London's Rainbow Theatre in January 1973 for an all-star concert organized by well-wisher Pete Townshend, who helped reintroduce him to a waiting and loyal army of fans. Accepting medical help, Clapton gradually weaned himself off drugs and drink and at the same time rebuilt his reputation and career with such hits as "I Shot the Sheriff" and his comeback album, *461 Ocean Boulevard*. Clapton may have been singing more than playing guitar—and he seemed to be veering away from the blues—but he was back and, most importantly, alive and kicking.

In subsequent decades, an Armani-suited, sober, and reliable Clapton evolved, singing, composing, enjoying hit records, and once again playing great guitar. Here was the Eric Clapton who could sell out twenty-four nights at the Royal Albert Hall in 1990. He was also the gossip columnist's delight, reported to be dating any number of superstar models and rock chicks.

He was so well liked that even the Queen of England decided to give him a couple of awards, first the OBE (Order of the British Empire) and then the CBE (Commander of the British Empire). Of course she may have been advised about his charity work that included setting up the drug and alcohol dependency treatment facility, Crossroads Centre, in Antigua.

Clapton jams with one of his blues heroes, Buddy Guy, in 1969. *David Redfern/Redferns/Getty Images*

Clapton with Muddy Waters and Johnny Winter in Chicago, Illinois, on June 12, 1979.
Paul Natkin/WireImage/Getty Images

During the 1990s, Clapton suffered two more severe personal blows. In August 1990, his close friend, guitarist Stevie Ray Vaughan, was killed in a helicopter crash in Wisconsin shortly after playing as a guest on Eric's own tour in 1990. The following year, in March 1991, Clapton's four-year-old son, Conor, plunged seven hundred feet to his death from an open fifty-third-floor window in his mother's Manhattan apartment.

These were emotional shocks that could have left Clapton unwilling to perform again. But it would have been no use to anyone to give up. He decided to carry on, and the loss of his son was mourned in the best possible way with the moving song "Tears in Heaven."

Into the new millennium, Clapton was ready to confront his past and pay tribute to all those musicians who had been part of his remarkable journey. He agreed to play one more time with his former boss John Mayall. He even reformed Cream in 2005 and in a surprise gesture returned to the spotlight with Jack Bruce and Ginger Baker in sellout shows in London and New York. The Cream reunion signaled to the world that it was cool to bury any hatchets

B. B. King, Buddy Guy, and Clapton perform at the 20th Annual Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Induction Ceremony at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York City on March 14, 2005. *Scott Gries/Getty Images*

still sticking into the shoulders of rock. Afterward, the Police and Led Zeppelin both decided to get back together.

Eric himself didn't really need reviving. He had been working virtually nonstop during a recording career spanning forty-six years. During that time he unleashed a legacy of critically acclaimed bestselling albums, among them *Layla and Other Assorted Love Songs* (1970), *461 Ocean Boulevard* (1974), *Behind the Sun* (1985), *Pilgrim* (1998), and *Journeyman* (1989).

More recent albums—such as *Riding with the King* (2000), *Reptile* (2001), *Me and Mr. Johnson* (2003), and *Back Home* (2005)—have continued to ensure him an important place in a constantly changing music scene. In 2010 came his nineteenth studio album, *Clapton*—the same title as his first solo effort back in 1970.

The grizzled and happily married sixty-five-year-old was perhaps showing his age as he sang a sad and reflective version of the old standard "Autumn Leaves." A far cry from "Too Much Monkey Business" and "Steppin' Out." But it showed that Eric Clapton had finally arrived at his personal crossroads and chosen which way to go.

FIRE EXIT

1. When the Rooster Crowed

Childhood and the Blues, the Roosters, and Casey Jones and the Engineers, 1945–1963

ERIC PATRICK CLAPTON IS A PURPOSEFUL NAME that suggests strength and confidence. Yet his real name is the rather more humble Eric Clapp. He was born in Ripley, Surrey, England, on March 30, 1945. Ripley is a pleasant country village, about thirty miles from London. He was brought up by his grandparents, Rose and John Clapp, whom he was led to believe were his parents.

Clapton was fond of his grandmother Rose, who always took a keen interest in his career. She was known to telephone music magazines to correct any stories about Eric, especially those concerning his date of birth, much to his amusement. Although he rarely mentioned it in interviews, he learned at a young age that his "sister" Patricia was really his mother. She'd had an affair with a Canadian Air Force pilot stationed in England during World War II. He had returned to Canada before the birth of his child. Clapton's mother was just sixteen years old. After the baby's birth she moved away and Clapton's grandparents assumed parental duties at their home on The Green, Ripley.

The Roosters rock, circa 1963. From left, Clapton with his Kay guitar, drummer Robin Mason, singer Terry Brennan, Clapton's friend Tom McGuinness on guitar, and pianist Robin "Ben" Palmer.

Such affairs were considered scandalous at the time and led to the decision to create an illusory family background. Clapton discovered the truth about his real father at the age of twelve when his mother reappeared on the scene. He explained later: "When I was young I made a conscious decision that I didn't want to know anything about him, because it would be too painful, disappointing, and disruptive."

"I was the one that used to get stones thrown at me because I was so thin and couldn't do physical training very well! One of those types. I was always the seven-stone [98-pound] weakling. I used to hang out with three or four other kids who were all in that same kind of predicament. The outcasts. They used to call us the loonies."

—Eric Clapton on his childhood, *Rolling Stone*, 1974

Despite these complications, Clapton led a happy childhood and was well looked after by his grandparents, who, he confessed, "spoilt him." He went to Ripley Primary School and St. Bede's Secondary Modern before enrolling at Kingston School of Art with the intention of studying stained-glass design. His grandfather worked as a plasterer and bricklayer and expressed little interest in art or music. Clapton, however, had been listening to pop music on the radio from an early age.

Among Clapton's formative experiences was hearing records by Chuck Berry occasionally played by the BBC on a Saturday morning children's show. Clapton was only ten years old when he heard his first blues record, by Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, featuring Terry's howling harmonica.

Then Clapton spotted his first guitar, being played on a TV show in 1958. It was actually a Fender bass guitar used to back U.S. rock 'n' roll star Jerry Lee Lewis on his greatest hit, "Great Balls of Fire." Clapton thought the bass was a regular guitar, but it didn't matter. He was smitten with the idea of becoming a guitarist. If only he could get one, it could be a means of escape from humdrum village life.

Like many British teenagers in the late 1950s who couldn't afford the real thing with guitars in short supply, Clapton decided to make his own. He tried carving a Stratocaster body shape out of a block of wood, but gave up when it came to crafting a neck and fretboard. His grandparents took pity and bought him a plastic Elvis Presley–branded toy guitar. Now he could mime to Gene Vincent records while posing with his guitar in front of a mirror.

At the age of fifteen he was given a real Hofner acoustic guitar that proved equally hard to play with its warped neck. He discovered a few chords but gradually lost interest. In his late teens he took an increasing interest in art and yearned to lead a bohemian lifestyle. From the age of fifteen he began visiting London by train on weekends to mix with fellow "ravers" and beatniks.

In 1961, traditional jazz was the music of choice for the bohemian crowd. "Trad," as it

Jerry Lee Lewis in his "killer" pose at the piano.

Clapton's grandparents bought Clapton his first guitar—a plastic Elvis Presley–branded guitar like this one.

was known, would soon be supplemented by R&B and folk music. As Clapton hung out in Soho coffee bars and skiffle cellars, he met and heard twelve-string guitarist Long John Baldry performing what seemed like an authentic blend of folk and blues. Baldry was part of a growing revivalist movement that despised the commercial pop scene. They wanted to re-create the authentic African-American blues they heard on imported records.

On Friday nights the faithful gathered to play the latest records from the States, including the Chess album *The Best of Muddy Waters.* Clapton began to discover a host of bluesmen, such as Howlin' Wolf, Blind Willie Johnson, Otis Rush, Buddy Guy, and his particular favorite, Robert Johnson.

He was blown away by an album of Johnson recordings called *King of the Delta Blues Singers.* On first listen he found the anguish expressed in the lyrics too much to handle. He was also greatly impressed by Big Bill Broonzy; as he said years later: "I'd never heard anyone like him."

Despite all these early influences, Clapton had virtually given up trying to play the guitar, but he was taking the music he was discovering seriously and began to identify with the some of the more rebellious bluesmen. Somehow the angry voices and music from the past seemed to assuage his own teenage confusion caused by his unconventional family relationships.

Clapton went to Kingston-on-Thames Art College in September 1961 and while supposedly studying spent a lot of time drinking in the local pub at lunchtime and playing records. There he heard his fellow students digging LPs by Muddy Waters, Chuck Berry, and B. B. King. He also learned about the coolest of the rock 'n' roll stars, the late Buddy Holly. By now Clapton began to feel the urge to play again and not just listen to records. He got out his old guitar and started practicing. He tried to play the licks and riffs he'd heard on his favorite blues records. It wasn't long before he was assiduously adding his own ideas to develop a truly personal style.

"I can see that that's probably what it was. It was some kind of . . . it was me identifying with some, some kind of cry of suffering, yes—pain, because I had a very confused, tumultuous childhood. I mean no one has a perfect childhood but mine. . . ."

—Eric Clapton on his early love of the blues as a "cry of pain in the music," David Frost television interview, 1994

Gene Vincent's first LP, *Bluejean Bop!*, from 1956.

The Best of Muddy Waters on Chess Records, straight from Chicago.

The next step was to join a band. His art studies were neglected as he spent a lot of time playing in local folk clubs. He was expelled from college in July 1962 as his tutors felt he wasn't taking the course seriously. He enjoyed his new-found freedom, visiting more London clubs and sitting in. In September 1962, he got his first electric guitar, a Kay model advertised in the music press. For a while he played in a duo with guitarist Dave Brock. Then he met fellow guitarist Tom McGuinness at the Station Hotel in Richmond.

McGuinness was born December 2, 1941, in Wimbledon, London. He had been looking for a guitarist to form an R&B group, having quit his rock 'n' roll covers band. His girlfriend, Jennifer Dolan, had told him about a Kingston student she knew who could play blues guitar. It was thanks to Jenny that in January 1963 the eighteen-year-old Clapton and twenty-two-year-old McGuinness formed their pioneering R&B group the Roosters, named in honor of "Little Red Rooster," the Willie Dixon–penned, Howlin' Wolf blues.

McGuinness and Clapton became good friends. In 1963, the pair, together with Jenny, went to see one of their rock 'n' roll heroes. "Jenny was at art school with Eric and we all went to a concert in Croydon to see Jerry Lee Lewis," McGuinness recalls. "Bearing in mind Eric and I weren't working and she was an art student, somehow we managed to afford tickets for a box at the Fairfield Hall."

Jerry Lee was on the same bill with Gene Vincent and Heinz, the blond-haired singer who came to fame with the Tornados and had a 1963 solo U.K. hit with "Just Like Eddie." "Heinz had a really feeble voice and sounded as wimpy as you could imagine," McGuinness continues. "Right in the middle of his set a row of Teddy Boys stood up and each had a printed card with a letter on it. They held up the cards to the audience and it spelled out 'Jerry Lee Is King.'"

McGuinness and Clapton were highly amused. They couldn't wait to see Jerry Lee either. The pair clearly shared the same sense of humor and a love of R&B. "Jenny had been at Kingston Art College with Eric and she just mentioned that he was one of the people there who was interested in the blues," McGuinness says. "We're talking 1962–63, and it was a bit like being a member of a secret society. Just meeting someone who had actually heard of Howlin' Wolf or John Lee Hooker was great."

Before the birth of the Roosters, McGuinness had gone for an audition with the Dave Hunt Band at the Station Hotel in Richmond. "It turned out it wasn't really a blues band," he says. "It was Dave Hunt's Confederate Jazz Band. But they wanted to make the transition to R&B and Dave was auditioning for

someone to play guitar. I had phoned him to get an audition and at the end of the call I asked what instrument he played. He said, 'Trombone,' and put the phone down. I then knew it doesn't sound right, but I was desperate. So I went with Jennifer to the Station Hotel and immediately knew I was in the wrong place because there were three trombonists, string bass, piano, and drums. They were doing Joe Turner Kansas City–style blues. Lovely stuff but not what I wanted to play."

McGuinness was spotted trying to sneak away and was asked to plug in his amp and play along to their version of "Kansas City." McGuinness expected to play with a honky-tonk, Jimmy Reed groove, but had to play in E flat with a big band swing feel. "There was no cohesion at all," he remembers. "I told them it wasn't the band for me and left. But I heard later that the person who got the job was Ray Davies. I got off stage and Jenny said, 'How was it?' And I said, 'It was horrible.' And she said, 'Oh well, this is Eric and he *loves* the blues.'"

McGuinness continues: "When I was introduced to Eric Clapton, we just hit it off. We reeled off names to each other like Sonny Boy Williamson, Elmore James. I literally came off stage and there was Eric. I guess Jennifer had asked him to come down. We talked a bit and decided we'd try to get a band together, which became the Roosters."

The new group included Clapton and McGuinness on lead guitars backed by Robin "Ben" Palmer on piano, singer Terry Brennan, and Robin Mason on drums. Their drummer owned a car, which proved very useful. But there was one member missing: The Roosters couldn't find a bass player willing to play with an R&B group. Nevertheless, they began rehearsing at a pub in New Malden, and among the tunes they attempted were John Lee Hooker's "Boom Boom," Muddy Waters' "Hoochie Coochie Man," and Larry Williams' rocker "Slow Down."

Clapton's new Kay guitar was fitted with light-gauge strings that made it easier to bend the notes but were prone to breaking, causing delays while he had to restring. Once underway, his playing greatly impressed Palmer, who had made a previous attempt to form a group with McGuinness. The semiprofessional Roosters began playing parties and clubs and made lots of friends.

"It was pretty unstructured," McGuinness says. "None of us had any idea about how to get gigs. I got Ben Palmer in on piano because the year before, Paul Jones [later of Manfred Mann], Ben, and I had tried to get a band together. And we could not find a single other musician who wanted to play R&B. We usually got disgruntled jazzers playing drums or no-hopers playing bass."

Settling some myths about their origins, McGuinness adds, "Brian Jones was never in the Roosters, but confusingly Eric now insists that Paul Jones *was* in the Roosters. Paul wasn't."

McGuinness continues: "Eric was laboring, having been thrown out of art school. When the Roosters began rehearsing at a pub, I remember Eric turning up after spending the day plastering or helping his grandfather lay floors. We didn't have much equipment and we never found a bass player. But we never worried about it because we were very young and enthusiastic."

Howlin' Wolf concert poster, 1950s.