

THE
GUITARISTS
WHO
ROCKED
THE
WORLD

Ultimate HEAVY METAL Guitars

PETE PROWN

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LOUD & PROUD


Born in the hellfire of 1960s rebellion, heavy metal became the perfect storm of loud, distorted electric guitars; jackhammer drums; and gut-punching bass. Crowned with the caterwaul of a screaming frontman (or woman!), metal has become a global sound, commanding millions of fans—often in direct opposition to rock critics, who routinely bashed the genre in its formative years. The more the critics hated it, the more its fans came to revere this style of guitar-intensive, take-no-prisoners rock and roll.

The caricature of metal as a chaotic, barbaric noise is, of course, nonsense. It is a vital, complex form of music that emerged out of psychedelic rock and the blues revival. In the hands of master musicians, it can be loud and brutal or soft and introspective, something perfected by one of its genre-carving bands, Led Zeppelin, renowned as much for their acoustic songs as high-voltage anthems. Even blunt-force-trauma acts like Black Sabbath, Deep Purple, and Metallica played riffs that were both heavy and melodic. Witness Sabbath's "Laguna Sunrise" or Metallica's "One."

This brings us to the book you're holding in your mitts, *Ultimate Heavy Metal Guitars*. Here we'll detail over a half-century of metal and hard-rock wizards, how the music has evolved, and most importantly, the incredible guitars played. To avoid argument, this book won't judge who *is* and who *isn't* a metal guitarist or band—especially since the musical term *heavy metal* actually *predates* Led Zeppelin and Black Sabbath by several years. For our purposes, if their rock and roll is cranked and brain crushing, they're in the club, be it acid rock like Iron Butterfly and Steppenwolf, the prog of Rush and Kansas, or grunge by Alice in Chains. Naturally the axes of Jimmy Page, Tony Iommi, Eddie Van Halen, James Hetfield, and Slash will be thoroughly unpacked and put under the metal microscope. In these pages, *loud is loud*.

Welcome to the jungle, folks. ⚡

**THE
DROWN
IF
HAPPY**



The quintessential symbol of metal is the solidbody electric guitar, an instrument comprising a body and neck of “tonewood,” so named for the musical properties of the wood itself. That block is then carved (by a guitar builder known as a *luthier*) into myriad shapes and fitted with strings, hardware, and magnetic pickups capable of sounds ranging from fat and smooth to trebly and piercing. Finally, the solidbody is often finished in bodacious colors and graphics. Plugged into another iconic piece of gear—an amplifier head and pair of enormous 4 x 12 speaker cabinets, configured into a 100-watt stack—the electric guitar and ensuing sonic blast took metal from simply a loud style of music into something of beauty and sophistication. A universe of portable and affordable effects pedals—our much-loved “stompboxes”—only sweetens the deal.

The solidbody guitar is more than a mere symbol of the music—it’s a critical tool to get the job done. Throughout the ’60s, the balance of power between guitar types began to shift away from the quieter timbres of hollow- and semi-hollowbody construction toward the easily mass-produced solidbody. It’s an instrument that not only withstood high volumes but elegantly *shaped* this punishing sound into real music.

By 1970, high-volume heroes like Jimi Hendrix, Jeff Beck, Pete Townshend, and Eric Clapton had already proven they could fill arenas with decibels, and *without* uncontrolled feedback, by pairing those amp stacks to a solidbody—notably, the venerable Fender Stratocaster, Gibson Les Paul, and Gibson SG. To this day, these three models remain the cornerstones of metal-guitar design, be it a modern super-strat or countless Flying V and Explorer clones. Most modern solidbody designs are derived from the Gibson archetype (humbucking pickups, mahogany body, and built-in neck) or the Fender archetype (single-coil pickups, ash or alder body, and bolt-on maple neck).

With this musical technology in place, the thunder of metal was looming on the horizon. The gear, bands, and guitar heroes were finally coalescing. A storm of hurricane force was about to smash into rock and roll, and, better yet, there was nothing the critics could do about it. ⚡

ERIC CLAPTON

Over a long and extraordinary career, Eric Clapton has gone to great lengths to explain he had nothing to do with the coming of heavy metal . . . *except*, of course, he had so much to do with it. While Clapton's only actual heavy band was Cream—a trio that melded blues, psychedelia, extended improvisation, and British Invasion pop—his fiery, blues-based approach became scripture for future hard rock players. There's a reason why so many guitarists name-check Clapton as a critical influence.

A historic moment transpired in the spring of 1966, when John Mayall's Bluesbreakers entered Decca Studios in London with the ex-Yardbirds guitarist, barely out of his teens. Clapton brought a simple rig: a 1960 Les Paul 'burst, a Marshall 45-watt combo (Model 1962), and possibly a Dallas Rangemaster treble booster. Critically Clapton de-

By the fall of 1966, "Slowhand" was a member of the first super-group, Cream, along with bassist Jack Bruce and drummer Ginger Baker, releasing their debut, *Fresh Cream*. This album codified that Les Paul/Marshall combination, heard on "Spoonful," giving the solidbody guitar a sonic girth never achieved before. The guitarist's trademark "woman tone"—a warm sound created by rolling back the bridge pickup's Tone knob—only made the statement more compelling. By next summer's *Disraeli Gears*, Clapton got his hands on a newfangled Vox wah pedal for "Tales of Brave Ulysses," ratcheting up the bar yet again.

Cream's apex was 1968's *Wheels of Fire*, a double LP that cemented the rudiments of heavy guitar for all perpetuity. It's all here: the PAF humbuckers of Clapton's painted 1964 Les Paul/SG, known as "The Fool"

CLAPTON'S CRUNCHY TONE CONTRIBUTED TO THE RISE OF METAL AS MUCH AS ANYONE.

mandated that his amp was recorded at a stunningly loud volume, heard on tracks like "All Your Love" and "Key to Love." Clapton's bold blues phrases, bends, and vibrato—combined with this huge-sounding rig—created the watershed moment when heavy guitar tone was born. There had been dirty fuzz and overdriven sounds before, but this is when that cranked-to-11, overdriven-tube goodness was caught on tape for the first time. Truly a historic moment in guitar.

(the '60 sunburst had been stolen); Marshall JTM45/100 and Super Lead heads and 4 x 12 cabinets; and a wah-wah pedal, all pumping out big chords, pentatonic lightning, and just-about-perfect wrist vibrato. Clapton's solos in "White Room" and "Crossroads" remain incontestable proof of his six-string innovations.

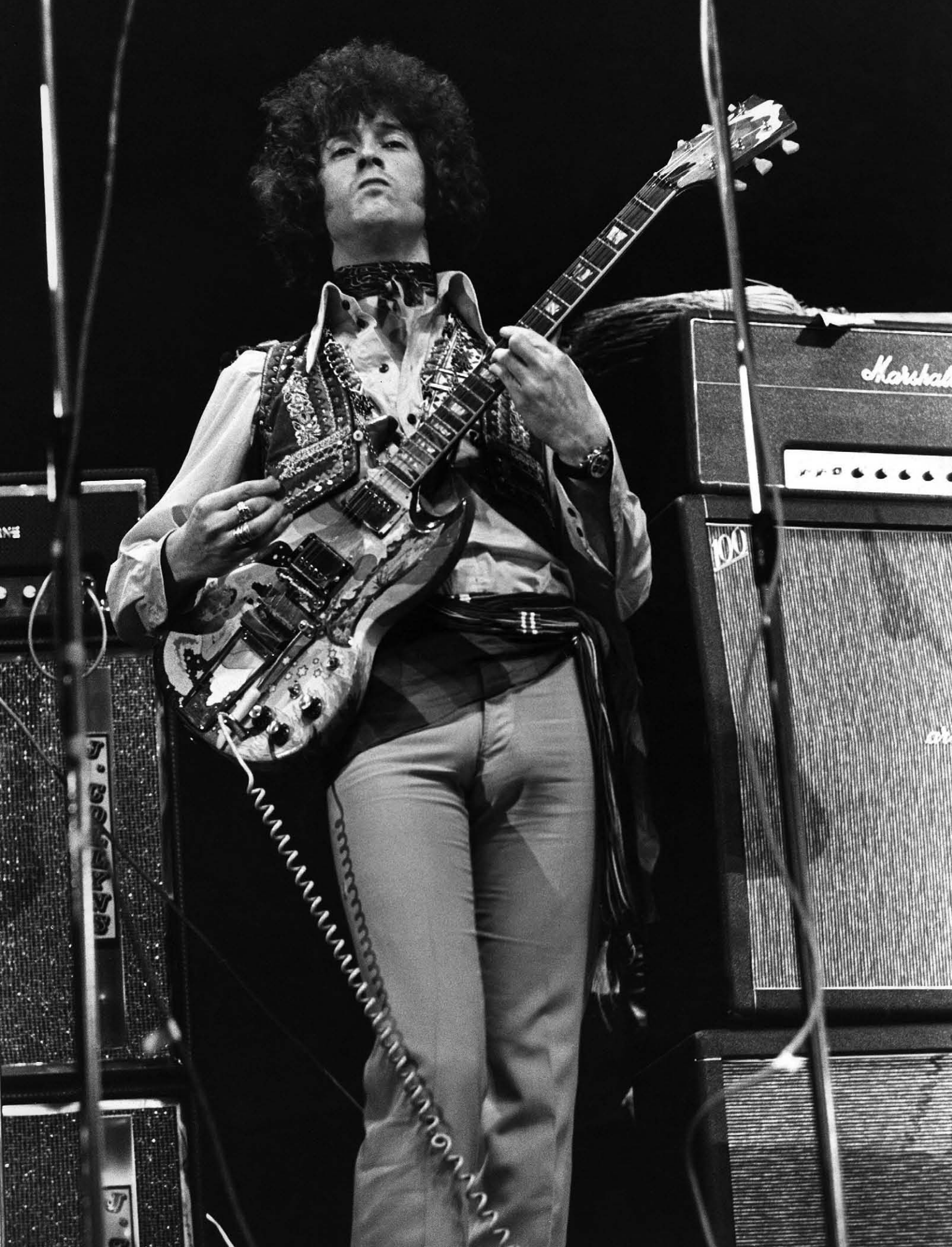
Putting the SG down, Clapton bought a Gibson Firebird at a Philadelphia tour stop in April 1968, and by Cream's farewell concert that No-



vember, he was playing a red Gibson ES-335, another iconic axe. By 1970 he had become a dyed-in-the-wool Stratocaster player (inspired by his hero Buddy Guy) and has been playing Fenders ever since.

For amps, Marshalls have been a part of the picture from John Mayall's Bluesbreakers onward. Returning to high-voltage FM rock in the 1980s and 1990s—after a decade exploring mel-low reggae, blues, the Tulsa sound, and ballads (usually with Fender or Music Man amps)—Clapton reliably has a full Marshall 100-watt stack onstage behind him, mixed with Fender tweed combos. This back-line fuels his Fender Eric Clapton Signature Stratocaster, which has a built-in 25 dB mid-boost circuit to deliver fatter, more Gibson-like tones when warranted. Despite topping the pop charts with lighter material, the shadow of Cream still lingers in his live and studio rigs.

In retrospect Clapton's crunchy tone emerged from the primordial ooze of psychedelia and, combined with soul-searing blues bends and power chords, contributed to the rise of metal as much as anyone else, despite his protests to the contrary. Every guitarist who overdrives a tube amp and bends a string owes a debt to that cheeky English lad who first cranked a Marshall back in '66. ⚡





Since the 1960s, the names Clapton, Beck, and Page have been uttered in hushed tones as Britain's greatest guitarists. Clapton and Page are easily more famous, but Jeff Beck was a singular virtuoso who took the electric solidbody into realms previously unknown. While he never played actual metal, his first Jeff Beck Group effectively drew up the blueprints—and revealed a heavier path ahead.

With The Yardbirds, Beck (1944–2023) had pioneered concepts of fiery lead guitar and controlled feedback, blues rock, raga rock, and psychedelia, only to be booted out on a 1966 U.S. tour for erratic behavior. Back in London, he cut a few solo 45s for producer Mickie Most (even singing, rather badly, on the bubblegum hit “Hi Ho Silver Lining”) before bumping into a singer named Rod Stewart. In short order, they added bassist Ronnie Wood—later guitarist with

AC30 and plexi Marshall JTM45 amps. For about \$300, Beck acquired another '59 Les Paul 'burst from future Cheap Trick guitarist Rick Nielsen, this one with rich, tantalizing flametop, all helping define his heavy new rig and tone.

The Jeff Beck Group appeared on the *Truth* LP in 1968—technically billed as a Jeff Beck solo album—and it proved a game-changer, including a '66 session featuring future Led Zeppelin members Page and bassist John Paul Jones, plus drummer Keith Moon from The Who. The result was “Beck’s Bolero,” a ferocious instrumental laced with Beck’s trademark feedback howls and screaming bends. “Shapes of Things” and “You Shook Me” offered relentless heavy blues (sarcastically called *blooze*, for its leaden approach), but the Jeff Beck Group became a hit, especially in the Unit-

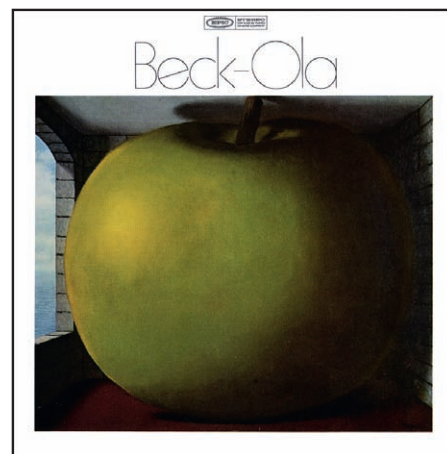
WHENEVER WE HEAR A SCORCHING SOLO, WE CAN GIVE BECK A NOD OF THANKS.

Faces and The Rolling Stones—and drummer Mick Waller, and the Jeff Beck Group was born.

Putting down the one-pickup Fender Esquire from his Yardbirds stint, Beck scooped up a 1959 (possibly '60) Les Paul Standard similar to those played by Clapton, Michael Bloomfield, and Fleetwood Mac’s Peter Green. He stripped its maple top down to a blonde finish and ran the Gibson through a Colorsound Overdriver booster pedal with Vox

ed States where they found a ready audience for their molten thud. In short order, Beck’s Les Paul tone and playing became so influential that even Jimi Hendrix attempted to learn the uncanny licks off *Truth*.

For gear, Beck switched things up on the second album, *Beck-Ola*. Instead of a Gibson, he grabbed a '54 Fender Stratocaster, an homage to both Hendrix and his Chicago blues hero, Buddy Guy. The Strat-through-Marshall tone here was even more



aggressive, as heard in “Plynth.” In fact, anyone with a passing knowledge of 1970s metal may hear echoes of this riff in future Deep Purple anthems. Not surprisingly Purple guitarist Ritchie Blackmore has long acknowledged Jeff Beck as his favorite guitarist.

By the end of 1969, the Jeff Beck Group had splintered and Beck was in a serious car accident that took him off the road for a year. By the time he reemerged in 1971, heavy metal had become a bona fide genre, while Beck moved on to funk and soul grooves in the second Jeff Beck Group. His main axe remained a Strat, along with an oxblood '54 Les Paul—a former gold-top that was refinished and converted to humbuckers.

Beck eventually found fame as a jazz-rock solo artist, a career move that propelled his career until his death in January 2023. Still, whenever we hear fierce overdrive and a scorching solo in today’s hard rock, we can give a silent nod of thanks for his immortal, proto-metal contributions in the first Jeff Beck Group. ⚡



JIMI HENDRIX

To aspiring guitarists of 1967, the arrival of the Jimi Hendrix Experience's *Are You Experienced* album was equivalent to Martians landing on Earth. Witnessed on his breakout '67 single "Purple Haze," the Seattle guitarist synthesized the blues-rock attack of Jeff Beck, Eric Clapton, and Mike Bloomfield into psychedelia—and upped the game by inserting a relentless funk groove, itself a new music invented by singer James Brown. The single instantly made the young artist one of the most relevant guitarists on the planet.

Born November 27, 1942, Hendrix demonstrated his expertise on three Experience studio albums, the *Band of Gypsys* live LP, and in concerts across four short years. Beyond funk, his rock had powerful roots in R&B—having toured as a sideman with Little Richard and the Isley Brothers only made his playing more credible.

TODAY WE SEE HENDRIX AS THE NEXUS OF MULTIPLE SOUNDS AND STYLES.

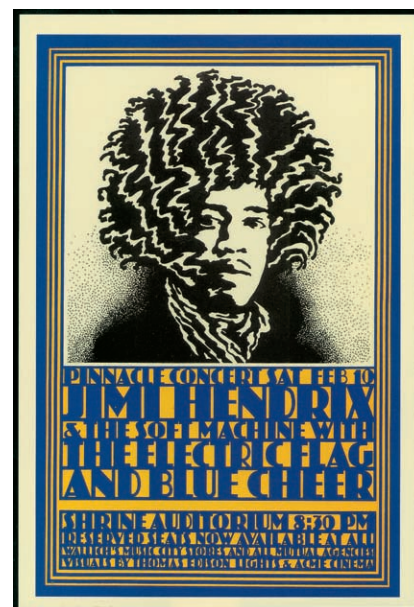
Not only was he a blinding soloist, but he was also a whip-sharp rhythm guitarist—something you'd never hear about Clapton or Beck. Hendrix was the complete guitar hero.

Beyond style, Hendrix revolutionized the actual tone of the electric solidbody guitar. Pre-Hendrix, the Fender Stratocaster was rocker Buddy Holly's plank of choice and a California surf staple—think of Dick Dale's reverb-y twang (Hendrix would later immortalize Dale in "Third

Stone from the Sun"). As a left-handed guitarist, Hendrix found that the Strat was also easier to flip over and restring; remember this was before the widespread availability of lefty instruments. He played other electrics: there are photos of him with a "black beauty" Gibson Les Paul Custom, Flying V, and SG; a Fender Jaguar; and an obscure Acoustic Black Widow. Yet he will forever be identified with large-headstock, four-bolt Strats of the Fender's early CBS era.

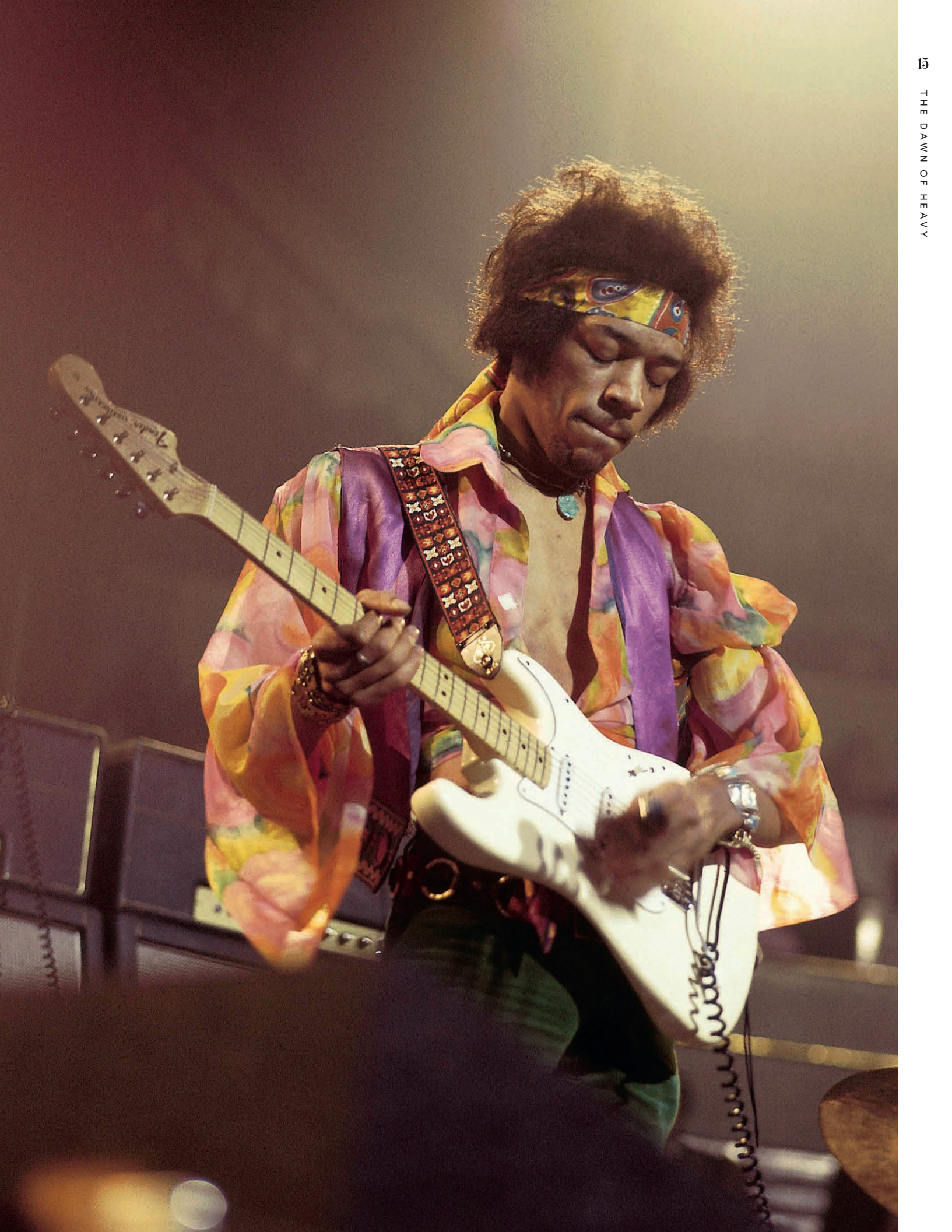
Those are just the guitars. His backline mostly comprised Marshall Super Lead 100 stacks for much of his career, though Hendrix endorsed Sunn heads and cabinets and used Vox AC30, Fender, Sound City, and Guild Thunderbass Quantum amps. In addition Hendrix was one of the first players to string together a line of stompboxes, weaving sonic textures with abandon. The stan-

dard Hendrix array included a Fuzz Face, Mayer Octavia, Uni-Vibe, and Vox wah, the latter immortalized on "Voodoo Child (Slight Return)." For pristine studio tech, the parade of effects on 1968's "All Along the Watchtower" hasn't been rivaled in over fifty years. One of the most important Hendrix effects of all—the mechanical, spring-loaded vibrato bridge and whammy bar of his Strat—was captured perfectly on "Machine Gun."



As for Hendrix's impact on the evolution of heavy rock, that's incalculable. Young guitarists learned his solos and riffs note for note, though there were precious few who could actually manifest that kind of fretboard fury. Among those who succeeded were John McLaughlin, Eddie Hazel (check the epic solo to "Maggot Brain"), Robin Trower, Frank Zappa ("Muffin Man"), Frank Marino, Pat Travers, and fusion-era Jeff Beck. It would take Stevie Ray Vaughan's arrival in 1983 to produce a definitive heir; even so, Vaughan was wise to go in a wholly different direction, emphasizing Texas blues over psychedelia.

Like Clapton and Beck, Hendrix inspired high-volume musicians without actually playing metal itself. The eardrum-punishing volumes of an Experience concert was evidence of things to come, and Hendrix' expertise at controlling feedback, distortion, and that wild melee of effects all but put *heavy* on the map. Today we see Hendrix as the nexus of multiple sounds and styles, a genuine pioneer—which is why he's regarded as one of the twentieth century's greatest musicians. ⚡



⚡ PETE TOWNSHEND

The architects of *loud*, The Who turned up the volume like no band in history. Louder and ruder than its contemporaries, the band cut a swath for acts that would follow: Hendrix, Black Sabbath, MC5, Sex Pistols, AC/DC, Van Halen, Pearl Jam, and more. And guitar giant Pete Townshend was its core.

In a long career, Townshend (born May 19, 1945) has used just about every major solidbody brand and model and inadvertently become one of our greatest amplifier innovators. When High Numbers changed its name to The Who circa 1964, that pale, skinny kid was wrangling Rickenbacker semi-hollowbodies with a backline of Fender or Vox amps. Townshend raged through "My Generation" and "The Kids Are Alright" with a savagery

amps? After playing "My Generation," he smashed a '50s maple-board, sunburst Strat in a plume of smoke and splinters—a tragedy for vintage lovers, but no doubt it launched The Who's career in America.

By '68 the fickle guitar maven began phasing out Fenders for the instrument that would become his staple for the next five years: the Gibson SG Special. One of the great utilitarian solidbodies, the SG Special was fitted with two P-90 single-coil pickups, which might seem odd for a guitarist who made such a racket. Strung with heavy Gibson Sonomatic strings, Townshend made his Specials roar through a variety of fuzzboxes and a rotating back line of Marshall, Sound City L100, and Sunn amps. Crank up 1970's *Live at Leeds* to

HIS CRANKED-UP MARSHALL AMPS PRECIPITATED A REVOLUTION.

hitherto unknown in rock and roll—all the more so when he smashed a few Ricks for onstage thrills.

By the end of '65, the twenty-year-old Townshend got Jim Marshall—the little-known owner of a West London music shop—to build him and The Who bassist John Entwistle early 100-watt heads and big cabinets. These cranked-up Marshall amps precipitated a revolution in live and studio sound, and heavy rock would never be the same. Who can forget the landmark Monterey Pop Festival in June 1967 and the legendary feedback from Townshend's Vox Super Beatle

hear the massive sound of this rig.

When recording the 1969 rock opera *Tommy*, Townshend deployed the SG Special, ES-355, Fender Jazzmaster, Fender Electric XII, and a Gibson J-200 that was his main acoustic for years—listen to "Pinball Wizard" to hear rapid-fire strumming. Around this time, he fully converted to Hiwatt amps for live gigs, notably the CP103 and DR103W, often overdriven by a Univox Super-Fuzz pedal.

In '71 the band recorded another studio masterpiece, *Who's Next*. Here Townshend crafted his signature



electric tone using the most unlikely rig: a '59 Gretsch 6120 Chet Atkins hollowbody and a Fender 3 x 10 Bandmaster amp with an Edwards volume pedal—all gifts from guitar buddy Joe Walsh. Most would think it a great setup for country or rockabilly, but here it proffered the crunchy power chords on "Baba O'Riley," "Won't Get Fooled Again," and "Bargain."

A sea change occurred on the *Quadrophenia* tour in '73 with the arrival of the Gibson Les Paul Deluxe into the Townshend arsenal. For the next decade, the Deluxes and its mini-humbuckers would become his go-to live axes. He had them modified extensively and numbered; the most notable tweak was the occasional addition of a full-sized humbucker between the two minis, an unconventional (yet now admired) configuration.

As for Townshend, it's hard to think of another guitarist who used so many brands and models—from Strats and Teles to Les Pauls and SGs to all manner of Gibson, Rickenbacker, and Gretsch hollowbody and semi-hollowbody designs. Townshend is a true guitar omnivore, as well as a bloody genius of a songwriter and rhythm guitarist. *Who knew?* ⚡



THE ROOTS OF METAL

While the first inklings of metal emerged at the very end of the 1960s, its roots went back to the 1950s—and even earlier.

The sound of a high-volume electric guitar came from blues clubs in cities like Chicago, Detroit, and Memphis, where Muddy Waters, Jimmy Reed, Big Bill Broozy, B.B. King, and Howlin' Wolf led bands that pushed the limits of guitars and harmonicas, using small tube amplifiers. T-Bone Walker's 1947 hit "Call It Stormy Monday" is another paradigm-shifting moment. Remember, this is years before the advent of big Marshall-type amplifiers and professional PA systems. Blues clubs became laboratories where music, volume, and stagecraft were mixed, tested, and cranked to perfection.

Many have asked why the sound of electrified rock was simultaneously incubated in the U.S., Great Britain, and Europe. This has much to do with U.S. military personnel stationed overseas after World War II; soldiers and sailors listened to Armed Forces Radio and asked record shops to stock American blues and jazz albums or brought them over themselves. This prompted curious U.K. teenagers to seek out and copy these alluring, dangerous-sounding Chicago blues records—teenagers with surnames like Jagger, Richards, Clapton, Beck, and Page. A 1964 live-television performance by American gospel singer Sister Rosetta Tharpe, seen *wailing* on a white Gibson SG/Les Paul, proved vastly influential on a generation of budding British musicians.

The story of loud continues with Link Wray, the Native American rocker whose late-1950s singles "Rumble" and "Rawhide" were transformative in the development of wild, distorted guitar. Lonnie Mack's singles "Wham" and "Memphis" of 1963 pushed the limits of string bends and fast riffing; James Burton's bending of light, unwound banjo strings on a Fender Telecaster were life-changing, heard on Ricky Nelson's "It's Late." The Kinks' 1964 "You Really Got Me" marked a U.K. turning point, as guitarist Dave Davies put small razor cuts in his amp's speaker to conjure raunchy overdrive.

By '65, the radical "fuzzbox," an electronic pedal that converted clean guitar tone into a square-wave signal, was beginning to transform pop, in tandem with explosive British Invasion. In that year alone, pivotal recordings came from The Yardbirds ("Heart Full of Soul" with Jeff Beck's sitar-like guitar) and The Rolling Stones, with Keith Richards using a Maestro FZ-1 Fuzz-Tone on "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction." On The Beatles' *Rubber Soul* album, Paul McCartney played fuzz bass on "Think for Yourself."

If '65 was the year of the British Invasion, '66 was the year of British blues and R&B, as The Yardbirds, John Mayall's Bluesbreakers, Ten Years After, and Savoy Brown emerged. The album *Blues Breakers with Eric Clapton* proved to be a milestone on which the twenty-one-year-old guitarist demanded his Marshall tube-amp combo be recorded at shattering levels. This simple act was a Big Bang moment in the history of electric guitar.

Back in America, the Paul Butterfield Blues Band swirled jazz, rock, and blues, inventing the "jam band" concept with long improvisations from guitar aces Michael Bloomfield and Elvin Bishop. Psychedelia, or acid rock, began brewing on the West Coast, deconstructing the pop song in favor of lengthy, hypnotic jams. Guitarists like The Grateful Dead's Jerry Garcia, Jefferson Airplane's Jorma Kaukonen, and Big Brother & The Holding Company's Sam Andrew and James Gurley were critical in the evolution from clean and twangy guitar to loud and fuzz-addled. Bold steps toward hard rock came from noisy bands like Iron Butterfly ("In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida"), Blue Cheer, and Vanilla Fudge, whose smash cover of "You Keep Me Hanging On" influenced everyone from Deep Purple to Led Zeppelin.

By '68 traces of heavy metal could be spied on the horizon, thanks to the bluesy psychedelic sounds of the Jimi Hendrix Experience, the Jeff Beck Group, Jimmy Page's Yardbirds, and Cream. This music itself was *not* metal, but the combination of psychedelia, blues, and Brit-pop pointed toward louder things on the horizon. The parallel arrival of the 100-watt Marshall amp "stack" only confirmed that.

Metal was almost here. ⚡

LEFT: LINK WRAY'S LATE-1950s SINGLES WERE TRANSFORMATIVE IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF WILD, DISTORTED GUITAR.
RIGHT: SISTER ROSETTA THARPE PROVED VASTLY INFLUENTIAL ON A GENERATION OF BUDDING BRITISH MUSICIANS.