

There are lead guitarists and then there is a genius named...

# ALBERT LEE

Mark Derek caught up with the legendary British guitarist on a couple of his recent UK tour dates and together they reminisced about days gone by and reflected on Albert's initiation into country music and those early musical influences.



Having surpassed more than 50 awe-inspiring years in the business and with only less than a year to go until he reaches a milestone birthday, 'the guitar player's guitar player' doesn't appear to be showing any signs of slowing down as he continues to regularly perform both sides of the Atlantic.

The multi-award winning Albert Lee is undoubtedly the finest guitarist the UK has ever produced. Said to be 'the one who got away' since the day he left these shores for the US, he's long been recognised as one of the top guitarists in the world and according to many...possibly, even the greatest! Ok, so he may not be a household name like guitarists Ronnie Wood, Eric Clapton or Brian May

but it's actually those guys and a never-ending list of others who hold the utmost respect for him, they look up to him and jump at the chance of working with him! Furthermore, ask anyone associated with guitar playing whether they've heard of Albert Lee' and the answer will invariably be 'yes'.

With no personal chart success and never seen as one to hog the lime-light and take centre stage, instead, the name Albert Lee remains globally renowned as an incredibly successful session guitarist and sideman. "Yes, I've been very lucky," was Albert's usual unassuming passing response when I just happened to remind him that he's worked with an endless list of the world's greatest guitarists over

the years. Even a well-earned 3-week mid-tour break from touring with UK band Hogan's Heroes last autumn couldn't stop him diverting to Toronto, Canada - en-route to his home in Los Angeles, to do a gig with legendary guitarist James Burton.

So it may come as a surprise to learn that in his early years, guitar supremo Albert Lee in fact first learnt to play piano before setting his sights on the guitar. Born in Leominster, Herefordshire in 1943 but raised in Blackheath, South London - it wasn't until some years later that Albert took up guitar playing when he finally got his hands on a 'Hoffner President' acoustic - but rumour has it, it was always an electric guitar that he wanted.

*"I got the bends and the Rock 'n' Roll from James and I got the country swing from Jimmy Bryant and I put them together and I'm lucky enough to be able to do both styles with a few other things thrown in."*

After leaving school at 16 and turning 'pro' in 1959, Albert played in various bands up until the time he joined Chris Farlowe and the Thunderbirds in 1964 - an R&B/Rock 'n' Roll band with whom he recorded and toured over a four year period. Albert became disillusioned though with the direction in which things were going. "I was doing OK with Farlowe but I just wanted to move on."

So how did Albert first get involved with country music - a style in which he says he was always interested throughout the 1960's?

Well a lot of praise must go to Albert's good friends Chas Hodges

Smith, Hank Locklin, Guy Mitchell, Nat Stuckey and Jody Miller.

**"I wanted to make it a bit more Rock 'n' Roll but they just wanted Jim Reeves and Johnny Cash."**

Fast becoming recognised as the finest British guitarist in country music, Albert was also singing for the first time in his career as well, however, with increasing demands for session work and somewhat frustrated by the audience's expectations, Albert decided to leave the band. "Your dad (Jon Derek) had a better feel for those guys than I did. I wanted to make it

to be a huge #1 hit for US star Ricky Skaggs - (another prominent figure with whom Albert would later work on a number of occasions). "Yes, I'm very thankful for that - it certainly paid a few bills for a couple of years. There were some good cheques - I wish I'd written the whole thing instead of a third of it."

After bumming it around London for a while doing the odd session, including the infamous Jerry Lee Lewis's *London Sessions* album gig, he eventually met up with The Crickets. Albert went on to tour and record with them for the next couple of years and finally moved to Los Angeles in 1974. It was there and then

Skaggs, Rodney Crowell and later Vince Gill.

"Emmylou was a big turning point for me. I felt very fortunate playing in that band. I was really into Buck Owens, George Jones and all that stuff which I got a chance to play with your dad (Jon Derek) so after a break in the middle I joined Emmylou and I knew all this stuff and felt very comfortable playing it. Ricky was friends with Emmylou when I joined the band and when we did the first record that I played on, *Luxury Liner*, they flew him in to play on the album and that's when we first met and I thought boy, this guy is great. Then Rodney left to pursue his own career

with a few other things thrown in. I copied solos and it was only after a year or so that I didn't have to play the solo note for note - I could make it up and play around that solo I had just learnt. So I learned my way around the guitar really well from an early age."

**"He wasn't a great guitarist but he did some really cool things."**

Since joining Emmylou in the mid-70's there's been no looking back for Albert and he has gone on to work with and, form great friendships over the years with a number of the world's finest guitarists and entertainers from

he would be up on my list, as would Jimmy Bryant - he played fantastic all his life - a really hot country swing player. My style is based on those two players - both of those guys are a big influence on my playing."

After another highly successful UK tour with Hogan's Heroes that ended late in 2012, I'm sure Albert is only too pleased to be back home. He told me there's nothing he misses about the UK because he's here all the time. "I wouldn't move from LA - I love it too much...the sunshine, the Mexican restaurants and...driving my car - I've got an old '61 Ferrari and a Triumph that needs fixing, a TR8, and an old Cadillac that I need to get running."



and Dave Peacock (Chas & Dave) who introduced him to a country band they knew that played on the Hammersmith/London circuit called Jamie, Jon & Jerry. It didn't take long before Albert was sitting in with them on gigs and loving it. Chas Hodges was quoted to have said, "Me and Dave spent many a good night over Hammersmith watching Albert Lee!"

Jamie, Jon & Jerry split up by the end of 1967 and, together, Albert Lee and Jon Derek decided to form a new band - Country Fever. During the period 1968 - 1970, Country Fever toured with a number of visiting US artists such as George Hamilton IV, Bobby Bare, Skeeter Davis, Connie

a bit more Rock 'n' Roll and they just wanted Jim Reeves and Johnny Cash! So I started to listen to The Byrds and The Flying Burrito Brothers - it was slightly more current and a younger version of country music."

Albert joined Heads, Hands & Feet in 1971, with whom he scored some mediocre success before they disbanded a couple of years later. His time with them though did give birth to the much loved classic *Country Boy* that he wrote with fellow band members Tony Colton and Ray Smith - the original version was included on their first album. Little did he know that this guitar picking showpiece of a song would some years later go on

that he first met his idols, Phil & Don Everly and Albert soon found himself doing regular shows with Don, before getting a call to join Joe Cocker's band.

**"Emmylou was a big turning point for me...I felt very fortunate to be playing in that band!"**

It wasn't though until 1976 that the 'country' doors really opened for Albert when he joined Emmylou Harris's Hot Band in 1976 replacing James Burton on guitar. All of a sudden he was meeting other great country musicians such as Ricky

and Ricky joined the band. He was quite dismayed when a few months later half the band left! He said, 'It's nothing personal is it?' I think he started playing electric guitar because of me."

Known for his speed of playing, his technical virtuosity and his unique distinctive style, I was keen to find out from Albert (AKA 'Mr Telecaster') what has made him so different from all those other great guitar players. "I've kind of mixed it altogether. I got the bends and the Rock and Roll from James (James Burton) and I got the country swing from Jimmy Bryant and I put them together and I'm lucky enough to be able to do both styles

all genres of music. Many of these great names have without doubt influenced Albert's own career. It's not surprising then that he has his own personal favourites who have stood out for him.

"Musically I'd have to put the Everly Brothers up there because they were huge heroes. Don especially was a great guitarist - he was very innovated, especially with all those intros. When I first heard Scotty Moore I thought 'this is fantastic' but looking back on it now I can see he wasn't a great guitarist but he did some really cool things. But of course James Burton was great when he was like...15 and he's still great so

L to R: Eric Clapton & Albert Lee (1980)  
Don Everly, Albert Lee & Jon Derek (Wembley 1980)  
Albert Lee & Willie Nelson (1988)  
Emmylou Harris with Ricky Skaggs & Albert Lee (Wembley 1980)

Hopefully on this occasion he'll find some free time to get at least one of those cars fixed in between gigging with his new American band that he was keen to talk about. "Some of these guys I've known for years, especially the piano player. I think what pushed me over the edge was I did a tour with John Jorgenson (a really good guitar player) as a duo - but with a rhythm section. I sang half the songs and we



western swing and rock and roll with songs previously recorded by artists such as Glen Campbell, Gram Parsons, Rodney Crowell, The Everly Brothers, Ray Charles, Delbert McClinton, Collin Raye and Elvis Presley. Apparently, their new album will be out just in time for the next UK/European tour that kicks off in Warlingham, Surrey on March 1st.

***“One way or another we’re going to do a decent gig at the end of next year and there’s no reason why it can’t go into my 70th year doing special things.”***

Albert is more than happy with what he’s achieved since those early days when he first started out on the British country music scene and it’s no secret that Albert will be celebrating his 70th birthday at the end of this year. Like so many of his peers he’s still rockin’ and rollin’, sounding great, and working just as hard as ever - if not harder. Apart from the perpetual travelling he still enjoys it. With various plans in the pipeline and a website dedicated to the project, it’s sure to be a momentous occasion and Albert has some ideas of his own that he would like to see come to fruition.

“We’re still planning it but one way or another we’re going to do a decent gig at the end of the year and there’s no reason why it can’t go on into my 70th year doing special things. Initially we thought about doing it in the UK but I think to get all the people that I want involved, it would be nice to do one in LA or Nashville because then I’d have a better chance of getting Emmylou, The Crickets and the Everly Brothers. Unless I got a really big promoter here who would pay the airfares and everything to get them over here, it wouldn’t work.” So what about good friends Eric Clapton and Bill Wyman? “Oh I’m still hoping to get Bill and Eric involved too!”

CMP

*Albert Lee & Hogan’s Heroes are touring in March.*

*Thanks to: Sue Hargreaves, East West Promotions, Graham Barker and Alistair Peck (www.humaneyestudio.co.uk)*

did these gigs and I thought boy...I could come back and do these on my own because John goes and does his own gypsy jazz thing. So, I had the chance of doing one or two gigs... I called around, we did a rehearsal and we went and did the gigs and I thought ‘this is great’. We’re just a four-piece, we don’t have a steel but it’s working really well, although I wouldn’t mind adding a steel, but we’re getting started. We did a gig in New York at The Iridium... it was great. We’re doing three more nights there in February (8th, 9th, 10th).”

I managed to catch up with Albert on two of his recent UK dates... the Newark Palace Theatre and the Bedford Corn Exchange. It’s hard

to believe that he has been working for 25 years now with the band Hogan’s Heroes and I remember first seeing them when they performed at the 1988 Wembley Country Music Festival just a year after they formed. The keyboard player may have changed a few times since then but veteran musicians Gerry Hogan (pedal steel/rhythm guitar), Peter Baron (drums/vocals) and Brian Hodgson (bass) have been with him from the start. With the recent addition of Gavin Povey (keyboards /vocals) and of course Albert (lead guitar/piano/lead vocals) - this really is a superb five-piece outfit. Their repertoire comprises a good mix of traditional country, contemporary,