

# FEATURES





# Johnny A

## Fuzz-Fueled Flying with the Yardbirds

BY MICHAEL MOLEND A

**THE COOL, SOPHISTICATED IMAGE OF** Johnny A—whose single “Oh Yeah” from his 2001 album, *Sometime Tuesday Morning*, was likely the last time we heard a guitar instrumental hit #1 on AAA radio—may seem at odds with the unpredictable, raucous Yardbirds. But he got the call to tour with the Rock and Roll Hall of Famers last year, and, as it turns out, the pairing isn’t nearly as surprising as one might think.

“My two favorite bands growing up were the Beatles and the Yardbirds,” says Johnny. “I probably wouldn’t be the guitar player I am if it wasn’t for the Yardbirds.” “Over Under Sideways Down.” That band was hugely inspirational and influential for me when I was a kid.”

The Yardbirds—which currently includes, in addition to Johnny, founding member Jim McCarty on drums, bassist Kenny Aaronson, harp player Myke Scavone, and vocalist/guitarist John Idan—first came into Johnny’s orbit when they shared the same label, Steve Vai’s Favored Nations. In 2004, they asked Johnny to sit in when they toured Boston, and his appearances soon became a regular thing whenever he was in the same city as the ’birds. Ultimately, personnel comings and goings and schedules worked out for the group’s 2015 tour, and Johnny A stepped into the active musical history of a band that has meant so much to him.

**What was it specifically that made the Yardbirds such a touchstone for you?**

After the Beatles and that initial wave, I really decided that I wanted to be a guitar player, and I think I was attracted to the Yardbirds because they weren’t the typical British blues-rock band. The amount of elements that made up the sound of that band is quite incredible when you think about it—especially for the day. They had the whole blues rave-up thing, of course, but they were also

influenced by Indian music and Gregorian chants, and everything was filtered through a pop sensibility. They were just so forward thinking, and *nobody* played guitar like Jeff Beck. Quite honestly, when I went to review the material to get a refresher course on it—even though I knew the whole song list—the music struck me as being fresh all over again. It didn’t sound dated. It didn’t feel dumb. I was totally re-inspired.

**Any time a player steps into a band that’s iconic, there’s that struggle of paying homage to the original parts and trying to be yourself, as well. How did you negotiate that tightrope?**

That’s a great question, because there was definitely a little volleyball game with myself. Initially, I figured, “Well, I’m pretty much going to do the material verbatim, and try to get the tones right.” But a good buddy of mine—who is a good rock guitar player—said to me, “Man, I wouldn’t do that. I think you should pay respect to it, and maybe play some of the classic lines, but they’re hiring you to be you, and you also have fans who want to hear you play this music as Johnny A.” So, at the end of the day, I took the key parts that I felt I would want to hear if I were in the audience, and then I just explored my own sensibilities within the character of what the Yardbirds are to me. Whenever I improvised, I would put that hat on. It wasn’t like improvising on one of my own songs—it had to be in the style and headspace of what I’d do if I were playing with the band in 1965 or so. It’s exciting for me to play those songs, and I definitely wanted to preserve, promote, and protect the band’s legacy, but I also had to leave some of my own blood on the stage.

**I know from following you on Facebook that you put together a Yardbirds pedalboard for the gig.**





Yeah—my “Yardboard.” The whole rig is completely different from what I use on my gigs. First of all, I’m not using my Gibson Johnny A Signature guitar. I’m using a Les Paul—one of the new True Historic models. Truth be told, I *couldn’t* use my signature guitar on the gig, because when I stepped on a fuzz box with my hollowbody, I couldn’t control the guitar. It would howl uncontrollably.

There’s also a cool story about the Macari’s fuzz box from the U.K. When I got the gig, Anthony Macari reached out to me and said, “Hey, man, give me a call. I’d love to help you. We have a long history with fuzz units and the Yardbirds.” But he didn’t have a Tone Bender Mark I at the time, and I really wanted one, because that’s the sound on the Yardbirds records from 1965 and ’66. He said they were planning to make one, but he couldn’t get it to me by the time I started rehearsals with the band. Happily, he graciously and generously provided me with a prototype for the tour. Interestingly, the original Mark

I Tone Bender went to the Yardbirds and Jeff Beck, and the first reissue went to the Yardbirds and me [*laughs*]. It’s kind of cool. I still couldn’t get that cheesy fuzz tone like “Heart Full of Soul” out of the Mark I, so I’m using an Analog Man Sun Bender Mark IV for the real thin-sounding parts.

Then, although I’m a Marshall artist, it has been very hard to get the amps I use, so the most consistent things I could find from venue to venue were Vox AC30s. Now, to me, Vox amps are quirky. They sound great when they sound great, but I’m so used to the character of a Marshall, because I’ve been playing them all my life, and I know how to get what I need to get out of them. It’s not quite as simple with the Vox.

**What adjustments did you have to make to get a sound you were comfortable with?**

I’m typically going after what I usually do—which is the amp isn’t cranked. I’m not running the AC30s really hot—the Volume knobs are somewhere between 3

and 4. There’s just enough gain where it’s pushing the amp, but I can get a good, sustaining solo sound with my pedals. Also, if I want a clean sound, I want to be able to turn down the Volume on my guitar to get there. Actually, the only real challenge has been balancing my two overdrive pedals and two fuzz pedals.

**So how does it feel to stand alongside the ghosts of former Yardbirds guitarists such as Beck, Eric Clapton, and Jimmy Page?**

I don’t want to sound presumptuous or anything like that, but it really feels like the Yardbirds. The current band has this great spirit to it. A friend recorded about 30 seconds of “Happenings Ten Years Time Ago” when we played in Phoenix, and when I heard it, I thought, “Wow. It feels like what I remembered hearing on the records, but yet it’s fresh.” I don’t feel we’re doing this retro, tribute-sounding thing. This band seems to have its own life. 🎸



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