

Eric Clapton

by Jan Hodenfield

After his return from the Blind Faith tour in the US, Eric Clapton kind of hung out for a while. He sat in with George Harrison, Steve Stills, Howlin' Wolf and Dr. John sessions and went on the Delaney and Bonnie European tour. He seemed to be treading water.

On the Delaney and Bonnie tour, which Eric sponsored, he had made a point of staying in the background, both on and off stage. While Delaney was bopping around the dressing room of Fairfield Hall in Croydon, and Bonnie was fanning herself, hoarsely wondering where her voice had gone, George Harrison, splendidly turned out in black monkey fur, strode in, casting a cold eye on all interlopers. Eric huddled in a corner as though he were one of those hangers-on.

Then on June 14th, at a London benefit for Dr. Spock and the American Civil Liberties Defense Fund, he appeared for the first time as leader of his own band, Derek and the Dominos. In July, 'Eric Clapton' was released, the first album built solely around Clapton and the first in which he took vocal credits.

Clapton may be God to his fans, but as far as he's concerned, he's just, at 25, a struggling musician who'd like to be a rock and roll star when he grows up. Although he is still hiding from his own stature in opting against "The Eric Clapton Group," there is no doubt who the Dominos are backing. Rehearsing with Bobby Whitlock, Carl Radle and Jim Gordon at London's Revolution Club on a quiet Wednesday afternoon in August, the tentative singing on the album had strengthened and hardened and Eric Clapton was the rocking rolling star. Three days later Derek and the Dominos were to start a month-long tour of British clubs at which Eric insisted the maximum admission could not be more than a pound.

Eric lives in a sort-of Moorish house, deep in the Surrey countryside. There was no answer to repeated doorbell ringing. Entering the house from the terrace on the other side, we halloed. A cat, dozing in the sun, looked annoyed. Down to the swimming pool with its 12-foot-long guitar-in-tiles on the pool floor; no-one there either. Checked the library. A tennis shoe on a table, sunglasses on the couch, a kodacolor of his parents on the end table, gold records on the wall for 'Disraelie Gears,' 'Goodbye,' 'Best of Cream,' the single "Sunshine of Your Love", and both a platinum and gold record for 'Wheels of Fire.' Picked one of a large selection of books on the silent screen and settled down in the after-the-bomb stillness. The only interruption was the sudden jangling of the phone. It was Eric's mother. She wanted to wish him well on the start of his tour. An hour later, Eric came

stumbling downstairs in robe and slippers, looking sleepy and abashed. A cup of tea, he changed into his jeans and we went out to the garden to talk.

Why have you started leading your own group after all these years?

Well, because it was the only thing that I could do. It was that or fitting into someone else's group, or just playing on sessions, and I just felt a great need to get up front and sing, and be what I want to be, instead of being frustrated and playing just lead guitar behind someone else.

I still get a great deal of satisfaction out of playing on someone else's record, or singing in with someone else's group. I could still do that if this — if everything — fell through and I suddenly lost faith in my voice, or something, I'd probably still be happy just playing in a group. But so far I'm really very keen to do this thing.

How long do you think this group will stay together?

Two years is a fair period of time . . . really is quite a long time, you know. But, uh, if everything goes as well as it's gone, there's no reason why it should end at all . . . the only thing that might step in the way is the fact that I'm English and they're American and they've come to my backyard and they might get homesick, and if that's true then they might want to go home again at some point. But, other than that, musically I think there's every reason for it to stay together forever.

Why are you singing now?

Ah! I don't know. Maybe someone else could tell me. I think, just to sort of cut down on the guitar playing, to substitute it with something more natural. You know, I think it's really more natural to sing with your voice than anything else. I've been doing it with my guitar . . . And now I just want to kind of balance it out a bit.

For the most part, I've been very pleased. Up until now I've been doing it in the kind of fashion where I play something or write a song or sing a song and then play it back. Like tape it and play it back and check it out, and then do it again, and play it back and check it out just to see . . . try to be as methodical about it as I can so that I don't go too far into anything without knowing what I'm doing.

It took you a long time to get into singing. I know people said you were very reluctant to do it. Why was that?

I used to sing — I've sung with every group I've been with, except Blind Faith. But every group I sang with always had some other singer that was established, or better at it than I was, or that was more keen to get up and do it. I'd always sort of back away. It would just be sort of embarrassment or something at the last minute. I suppose it's just taken me this long to sort of pluck up courage.

What gave you that courage?

Ah! I think it was probably my friendship with Delaney because he inspired me such a great deal, and he gave me the confidence that I needed. He told me that anyone could do it, literally, if they just put their minds to it.

What songs are you happiest with?

I think I like all the songs . . . my performances are better on some than they are on others. I think the song I'm sort of least pleased with is "Bad Boy". I like that song but I still, in my mind, haven't worked out a way to do it, make it more than just ordinary. We've tried rehearsing it a hundred different ways and we still come back to the way that it