

# Rock guitar great Jeff Beck dies at 78

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The influential and innovative London-born rock guitarist Jeff Beck died on Tuesday at a hospital near his residence in Riverhall, East Sussex in southern England. According to a Facebook post on Wednesday, Beck “suddenly contracted bacterial meningitis” and “peacefully passed away.” He was 78 years old.

As one of numerous guitarists who came to international prominence during “the British Invasion” of the mid-1960s and beyond, Beck created a multitude of unique sounds and crafted his own playing techniques as he transitioned in and out of musical genres and styles over the decades.

Beck has been repeatedly listed as one of the greatest guitarists of all time. As recently as 2015, a *Rolling Stone* panel of top guitarists and music experts listed Jeff Beck at number five behind Keith Richards (Rolling Stones), Jimmy Page (Led Zeppelin), Eric Clapton and Jimi Hendrix.

Beck has sometimes been referred to as a “guitarist’s guitarist” because of his meticulous approach to playing and the fact that he inspired so many other noted players of the instrument during his lifetime. *Rolling Stone* has described him as “one of the most influential lead guitarists in rock.”

Perhaps Jeff Beck is still best known for his 20 months as the guitarist of the acclaimed English rock band the Yardbirds (1965-66). He joined the band within days of Eric Clapton’s departure in March 1965 over disagreements about the direction of the group.

Beck’s influence was immediately evident on the band’s second album *For Your Love*, which features his guitar work on three tracks and Clapton’s on seven others. In contrast to Clapton’s strict adherence to American blues, Beck favored and encouraged the Yardbirds to move toward experimentation and a broader range of influences.

With most British bands of that era moving away from the “pop” sounds associated with Elvis Presley,

Buddy Holly, Little Richard and Chuck Berry and in the direction of an eclectic mix, Beck contributed a strong blues base combined with rockabilly, as well as Indian and Middle Eastern musical influences.

By the time of the Yardbirds’ self-titled third album in 1966, which became semi-officially known as *Roger the Engineer*, Beck’s lead guitar playing entered never-heard-before territory. As the *New York Times* put it on Wednesday, Beck’s “stinging licks and darting leads on songs like ‘Shapes of Things’ and ‘Over Under Sideways Down’ added an expansive element to the music that helped signal the emerging psychedelic rock revolution.”

Although his stint with the Yardbirds ended contentiously after a US tour in 1966—he later said, “every day was a hurricane in the Yardbirds”—Beck continued experimenting with and mastering the technology of the electric guitar.

As he began a solo career, Beck used items such as the whammy bar, wah-wah peddle and fuzz box, feedback and distortion to expand the range of expression of the instrument like almost no one else. He also pioneered certain fingering techniques with both hands such as hammer-ons, thumb pluck, string bends and harmonics that at times could make the guitar sound like a human voice.

He formed the Jeff Beck Group in 1967, which included vocals by Rod Stewart, Ronnie Wood on rhythm guitar and various bass players and drummers over the next few years.

It is a remarkable fact that the Yardbirds produced three of the most celebrated guitarists in rock music history—Clapton, Page and Beck. While the first two achieved mass popularity, Beck never did.

While the matter of superstardom in rock music is the result of an unpredictable mixture of corporate support, circumstances, timing and luck, it appears that Beck made a deliberate decision to move in a direction that

was no guarantee of commercial or mainstream success. By taking his solo career in the direction of jazz fusion, guitar rock and strictly instrumental endeavors, Beck often continued to innovate without the elements, especially vocals, that so much of popular radio-play music depended upon.

Nonetheless, he continued to receive critical praise and was awarded the Grammy Award for Rock Instrumental Performance six times and the Best Pop Instrumental Performance once. Beck was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame twice, once as a member of the Yardbirds in 1992 and as a solo artist in 2009.

There are many great examples of Beck's electric guitar virtuosity. On his solo album *Flash* in 1985, there is an exceptional guitar accompaniment to Rod Stewart's vocals on "People Get Ready."

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Meanwhile, Beck has an extraordinary list of collaborations on his resumé. The lengthy list of artists that he worked with includes Luciano Pavarotti, Stevie Wonder, Macy Gray, Chrissie Hynde, Joss Stone, Imelda May, Cyndi Lauper, Wynonna Judd, Buddy Guy and Johnny Depp.

Jeff Beck's death has elicited an outpouring of comments and tributes on social media from those who he worked with and those who admired and learned from him.

Steve Hackett, former guitarist with the rock band Genesis, wrote on Facebook, "He pioneered the use of guitar sonics, reverb, repeat echo, distortion, feedback and so many more things. I see him as the tonemeister... One minute making the guitar sound like an unearthly voice, the next burning up the frets, but always with a great tone. His use of tremelo arm was completely off the scale, sometimes making it sound like an Indian instrument... He made the electric guitar sing and he was such a powerful influence on myself and many others."

Extraordinarily gifted guitarist Steve Vai wrote on Facebook, "In the pantheons of guitar players, Jeff Beck was the chosen one. He left us with so much beauty and light in our music world. I can't imagine the landscape of contemporary guitar playing if he had never been here, but as everything comes and goes in this world, his contribution reshaped our imagination of

what the guitar can do forever. Thank you master. You really did it and we so much appreciate you."

Adrian Belew, who played with Frank Zappa and was a key member of King Crimson, wrote on Facebook, "... on the ground as an American teenager (now 15 years old and in my first teen band The Denems) here's how it looked: Eric Clapton left The Yardbirds before we had even heard of them! His heart was into the blues so he joined John Mayall's Bluesbreakers. Unbeknownst to us Eric recommended his friend Jimmy Page to the band and Page recommended Jeff Beck.

"It would be a while yet before Clapton and Page reached our ears. from the first minute we heard Jeff there was no one else like him. HE WAS THE FIRST. Jimi Hendrix was yet to come (in 1967) as was Eric's first band Cream and eventually Jimmy Page's Led Zeppelin.

"Jeff's influences included the blues but ... also based on artists like The Shadows (England's version of The Ventures) Les Paul, Chet Atkins, rockabilly guitarist Cliff Gallup, Ravi Shankar and Indian music."

Beck worked with Roger Waters on his *Amused to Death* album in 1992. Water had this to say about him, "Jeff Beck is a kind of genius. I feel really privileged to have been able to work with him. He's also a really good guy and I love him. But to have spent that long in a room watching him play the guitar is a huge kind of privilege. One of the things that comes with making proper records and being able to work with people is that occasionally you get to stand in a room and watch somebody do it."

"First of all," Waters continued, "Beck is incredibly technically gifted, in ways that the rest of us can't even begin to think about. But he also has incredible pitch. When you play a harmonic and then play a melody on a whammy bar, it's quite extraordinary to listen to. He has the same incredible technique that Yehudi Menuhin, you know, or any great classical player has, because if you think about it, the way Jeff plays the guitar is a bit like the way any great violin player plays it because the intonation is so perfect and incredible."



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