

# Albert Lee

## The Guitarist's Guitarist

by Vicky Sokoloff

If you're interested enough in music to read *Goldmine*, chances are good that your collection includes some of Albert Lee's work. Lee moves easily from country to rock. He plays nearly every type of music while always managing to sound like no one but Albert Lee.

Born in Herefordshire, England, on December 21, 1943, Lee began to study classical piano at age seven. But after two years his love of rock 'n' roll won out. While he is not well-known for his piano work, he has continued playing keyboards throughout his career. He has recorded some brilliant tracks for artists such as Rodney Crowell and Ricky Skaggs. He has also included piano solos, some his own compositions, on his solo instrumental albums.

Lee got his first guitar, an arch-top acoustic, when he was 15. But he frequently played one borrowed from a school friend even earlier. Dedication was an early key to Lee's success. "When I was at school," he said, "I used to come home

every night and practice. I didn't get out much. I stayed in and played along with records." He spent a lot of time listening to American music, especially country and rock. The records he studied most were by Buddy Holly and the Crickets, Gene Vincent and the Blue Caps, the Louvin Brothers, and especially the Everly Brothers.

He first worked as a professional musician in January 1960, backing Dickie Pride on a Scottish tour. In 1961 he joined a group known as Bob Xavier and the Jury. The band worked U.S. bases and London clubs for about a year until Xavier left. Then known as the Jury, they became the house band for a famous Soho coffee house called the 2 1's. While playing with the Jury, Lee got his first studio work in a recording session with Jackie Lynton. In 1962 he met and became friends with Don Peak, then a guitarist with the Everly Brothers. Peak introduced Lee to B.B. King and other blues players, which was to have a profound effect on his musical development.

In the fall of 1962 Lee briefly joined the Nightsounds. They spent three weeks in Hamburg, Germany, playing at the Top Ten Club. The following month he returned to Germany with Don Adams and the R&B Trio.

Early in 1964 Lee returned to England from Germany, where he had been playing with a German band, Mark Warner and the Echolettes. Lee was looking for his next gig following a U.K. tour with Mike Hurst, Gene Pitney and Billy J. Kramer, when he heard that Chris Farlowe was looking for a new guitarist. He arrived at the Flamingo with his first wife, Lucy, on a Sunday afternoon in May 1964.

Farlowe describes what happened: "Albert got up on stage, started playing and everyone in the Flamingo was knocked out. He joined my band there and then." Lee toured and recorded with the group for four years through four major changes in the band's personnel. The Thunderbirds were a popular act, particularly around U.S. Air Force bases. They also toured extensively in Germany and Scandinavia. On one occasion the Thunderbirds opened for Cream. Lee used Eric Clapton's guitar and recalls, "The volume control was set at 10!"

As Chris Farlowe's personal success increased, the Thunderbirds were relegated to touring as a backup band. Session musicians were used for recording. Lee remembers those times, saying, "I really enjoyed playing with the band. But I think if we had been over in America we would have done a lot better. Chris would get all the recognition. We would be just the backing band. We weren't treated all that well, especially when he had his #1 record ["Out Of Time"]. I started to have less interest in the band after that."

Dissatisfaction and general boredom led Lee to leave the Thunderbirds in 1968. He soon formed a country-rock band, Country Fever, with Jon Derek and Pat Donaldson. At various times in his early career Lee was part of the Flintlocks, Neil Christian and the Crusaders, Jamie's People, Green Bullfrog (later to become Deep Purple) and Poet and the One Man Band. An album cut by Poet and the One Man Band featured vocals by Paul Williams, but it was never released. He also played briefly with Sandy Denny, but left before Fotheringay was formed.

"It was tough," he explained. "They just didn't accept that an English group could play country. Rock, yes...but not country." He also played with many American country artists when they toured in Europe.

Heads, Hands and Feet was formed in 1971. Other members of the group were Tony Colton, Ray Smith (both former members of "Poet"), Pete Gavin and Chas Hodges. In addition to lead guitar, Lee played keyboards and mandolin. He also did some vocals with an occasional solo. The group's self-titled debut LP featured Lee's original version of "Country Boy," a song which became a hit for Ricky Skaggs in 1986. Sadly, the group disbanded in 1973 even before the release of its third album, *Old Soldiers Never Die*. It was while playing the Troubadour Club in L.A. with HHF that Lee met Sonny Curtis.

Lee returned to London following the breakup of HHF and played with the Tumbleweeds and did some recording sessions. In 1974 Lee moved to Los Angeles and began playing with the Crickets. There he was quickly in demand for studio work. He toured with Joe Cocker as part of the Cock 'n' Bull Band from August 1974 until March 1975. Lee spent much of 1975 working on an album for A&M while living at Joe Cocker's. Both Lee and A&M were disappointed in sessions and the album was shelved.

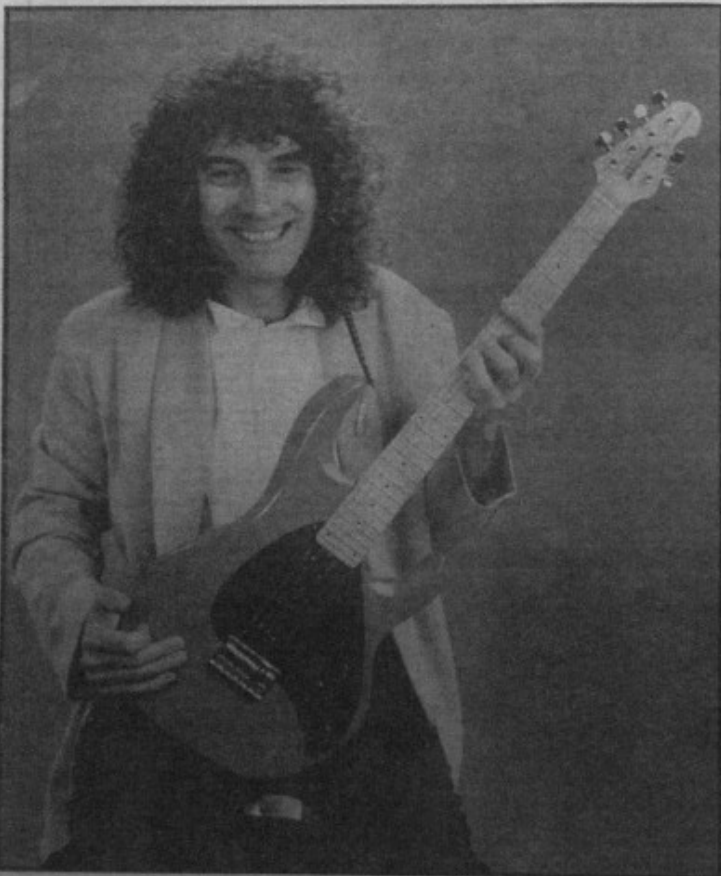
Farlowe and Lee were reunited briefly in 1975. Recordings from a short tour as Farlowe and Friends were the basis for the Polydor album, *The Chris Farlowe Band—Live*. They still work together from time to time.

In the spring of 1976, Lee replaced James Burton in Emmylou Harris's Hot Band. He recorded and toured with the Hot Band for two years. He continued to add his guitar and mandolin magic to her albums even after leaving the band, a tribute to both his musical skills and personal charm.

Lee played on Harris's Grammy-winning album *Blue Kentucky Girl*. He also played on a couple of Dolly Parton albums. So it was not surprising that he got the nod when Linda Ronstadt joined the two for the *Trio* album, which went platinum.

Lee's first solo LP came in 1979, when he was re-signed by A&M. *Hiding* was produced by Brian Ahern and included assistance from members of the Hot Band. The album included an updated version of "Country Boy." His old friend Don Everly lent harmony vocal to two tracks, "Setting Me Up" and "Billy Tyler."

Also in 1979 he began to tour and record with Eric Clapton's band. During the five years he worked with Clapton he still found time for studio work with numerous other artists, including Roseanne Cash, Dave Edmunds and Rodney Crowell.





His second solo album was released in 1982. *Albert Lee* was recorded in England. Produced by Rodney Crowell, it included only one Lee-penned tune, "Your Boys." "On The Boulevard," written by Hank DeVito, was chosen for release as a single in the U.S. It and Lee's reworking of the Everly classic "So Sad" were the high points of the album. Despite his long association with Don Everly, Lee took a totally fresh approach to "So Sad," using a classical-style piano backing. It remains the most notable cover of this much-recorded song.

When the Everly Brothers reunited in 1983, Lee became the centerpiece of their new band. He has toured with them ever since and has frequently performed "Country Boy" during their live shows. He has played on all of the post-reunion albums. But his Everly connection dates back to 1973, when he first met Don Everly. Lee picks up the story: "It was just after the breakup. Don was out playing clubs around Los Angeles just for the fun of it. We got to meet through the Crickets, who I played with. I did two albums with them about '73-'74. It was through them I got to meet Don and really became friends with him. You know, Don and I used to play a club in L.A. and through that I got to play on his *Sunset Towers* album. We've been friends ever since."

"Throughout the '70s, when he was going over to Europe, when I was free from Emmylou Harris or Eric Clapton, who I was playing with at the time, I would go with him. And I'd sing Phil's part." When Don Everly and Albert Lee appeared together at Wembley in 1980, they were jokingly referred to as "The Ever-Lee Brothers."

Lee played with the Sundance Saloon Set in the early '70s. The group included Buddy Emmons, John Hartford, Jerry Allison and Don Everly. They played every Tuesday at the Sundance Saloon in Calabasas. It was this connection that led to *Sunset Towers*, which some people referred to at the time as "Don Everly Meets Heads, Hands, and Feet."

Lee joined MCA's new Master Series label in 1985. The series is devoted to showcasing world-class musicianship in a solo instrumental setting. His first release, *Speechless*, was nominated for a Grammy. At the time Lee reacted by saying, "I didn't win. But I got the nomination. It was nice to get that far." The album included five original tunes. In addition to the trademark breakneck guitar runs, Lee presented his

skill on mandolin. He also added two mood pieces on piano, reflecting his early classical training.

"I never know what I'm going to play, really," Lee explained. "I'll have an idea and we'll run it through a couple of times and then I'll just play around with that, rarely the same way twice. Speed isn't everything, but it helps."

Albert Lee was the winner of *Guitar Player* magazine's poll as "Best Country Guitarist" for five consecutive years: 1982-1986. In 1986 he was inducted into the magazine's "Gallery of Greats."

*Gagged But Not Bound* was Lee's second Master Series album. It included some fine acoustic guitar work on the traditional "Flowers Of Edinburgh." But the true highlight was an original piano solo called "Monte Nido." Of course there are the more expected country, blues, jazz and bluegrass influences on tunes such as Duane Eddy's "Forty Miles Of Bad Road," "Tiger Rag" and "Midnight Special."

Although he's offered more work than he can possibly handle and has not been home for more than two weeks at a time for over two years, Lee is still working on another vocal album deal. He is considering putting it out on his own, although he has had interest from a record company. But mainly, he tours.

"I'm usually on the road with the Everly Brothers about five months a year. I used to fill in with session work and whatever else I could get. But now I want to tour more on my own. I just did a trade show in Anaheim for Ernie Ball/Music Man. I was playing with Steve Morse and Eddie Van Halen. That was fun."

Lee lives in California with his wife, Karen, and their five-year-old daughter, Alexandra. Lee has four grown children from a previous marriage, including 18-year-old twins, who are living in the U.K. And he recently became a grandfather when daughter Abigail had a baby girl.

He will be touring with the Everly Brothers again this year both in Europe and the States. He recently returned from his own tours in England with Hogan's Heroes and Australia with the Albert Lee Band. He also toured Japan with Steve Morse.

In the spring of 1990 he toured the Eastern U.S. with the Masters of the Steel String Guitar, sponsored by the National Council for the Traditional Arts. He joined them again this year for a West Coast tour. In June 1990 Lee received the International Musician Award from *Country Music People* magazine during Fan Fair in Nashville.

Lee can be seen in an occasional music video with the Everly Brothers and also in Carlene Carter's "I Feel In Love." He has appeared on TV with Carlene Carter on the David Letterman show and with the Everly Brothers on the TNN tribute to Tennessee Ernie Ford. But perhaps his greatest TV moment was his breathtaking acoustic accompaniment to the Everly Brothers' "Why Worry" on *Prairie Home Companion* in 1987. Another notable TV appearance was *Nashville Now* in February 1986.

About six years ago Lee did an instructional video for Star Licks. "It has 20 guitar licks. It's not for the beginner," Lee

explained. "I do them fast and then I play them slowly, explaining what I'm doing. Although I use an electric, it can be used for acoustic as well. It's still selling and there is interest in doing another one."

Lee's collection of instruments includes over 30 guitars. In addition to three old Everly guitars he also has a black and white J200 given to him by Don Everly, which he considers his most valuable. He has several other acoustics. His first choice for session work is his Martin 00028, although he tries to select the instrument he feels will best fit the work he will be doing.

Lee carries only one guitar on the road. Because of his light touch he seldom breaks a string on stage. Although he was long associated with the Fender Telecaster, he

has now switched to the Ernie Ball Music Man. He was involved in the design of that guitar and feels it works better for him. "It has a sweeter sound," he said. "It has more body, not as thin. I really like it working with the Everlys, especially on the ballads."

Albert Lee may well have been the most imitated country guitarist of the '80s. He is certainly among the most talented and well-liked musicians on the road today. He is equally at home with keyboard, mandolin, acoustic guitar and his trademark electric. He is without a doubt a true musician's musician.

A newsletter for fans, called Superpicker, is published in England. For details, contact: Bill Husband, 30 Haylock Close, Off Mill St., Liverpool L8 4UU, England.

## Selected Albert Lee Discography

### Vicky Sokoloff with Bill Husband

#### Solo Albums

label	record #	title	country	year
A&M	SP5238	Hiding	US	1979
A&M	SP4750		US	1979
A&M	AMLH64750		UK	1979
A&M	271		HOL	1979
Polydor	1067	Albert Lee		1982
Polydor	SPELP29		UK	1983
MCA	MCA5693	Speechless	US	1986
MCA	MCA42063	Gagged But Not Bound	US	1987

#### Solo Singles

label	record #	title	country	year
Bell	B-839	That's All Right/Best I Can	US	1969
A&M	2150	Country Boy/Setting Me Up	US	1979
A&M	7443	Country Boy/Ain't Living Long Like This	UK	1979
A&M	7467	Setting Me Up/Hotel Love	UK	1979
A&M	ALCH1	Hiding (promo)		1979
A&M	2306	Hunt Them Down/Have You Heard the News	US	1980
A&M	8108	Hunt Them Down/Have You Heard the News	UK	1980
Polydor	8106677	On the Boulevard/So Sad (edited for radio)	US	1982
Polydor	PRO197	Sweet Little Lisa/Pink Bedroom	UK	1982
Polydor	POSP 434	Radio Girl/Your Boys	UK	1982
Polydor	POSP 504	Your Boys/On The Boulevard	UK	1982

#### Albums as a Group Member

label	record #	group	title	country	year
Rediffusion	2550	Country Fever	Mountain Music Jamboree		1969
Lucky	3000		This Is Lucky Country		1969

Please see LEE DISCOGRAPHY page 124

