

Alexis Korner, 1972



ALEXIS KORNER

HE DEVOTED HIS LIFE TO DEVELOPING
A BLUES SCENE AND SPREADING KNOWLEDGE
OF THE BLUES THROUGHOUT THE U.K.

BY ROB BOWMAN

Alexis Korner is rightly known as the “Father of British Blues.” As a musician, journalist, broadcaster, mentor, connector, and proselytizer, Korner devoted his life to developing a blues scene and spreading knowledge of the blues throughout the U.K. With his bohemian sense of fashion and swarthy looks, Korner cut a style in the 1950s and 1960s that brimmed with confidence, taste, and continental outsider charm. He ultimately had a seminal influence on the lives and careers of such rock legends as Charlie Watts, Brian Jones, Mick Jagger, Keith Richards, Jack Bruce, Ginger Baker, Graham Bond, Dick Heckstall-Smith, Eric Burdon, John Mayall, Robert Plant, and Paul Rodgers’ band Free (whom Korner named). As Keith Richards pointed out, “Without Alexis Korner there would be no Rolling Stones.”

Born in Paris in 1928, Korner moved to England as a boy. His life changed forever when, as a teenager stealing 78s, he chanced upon boogie-woogie giant Jimmy Yancey’s 1939 recording “Slow and Easy Blues.” Intoxicated by Yancey’s deft use of accent, groove, and continuous improvisation on the 12-bar pattern, Korner found his calling.

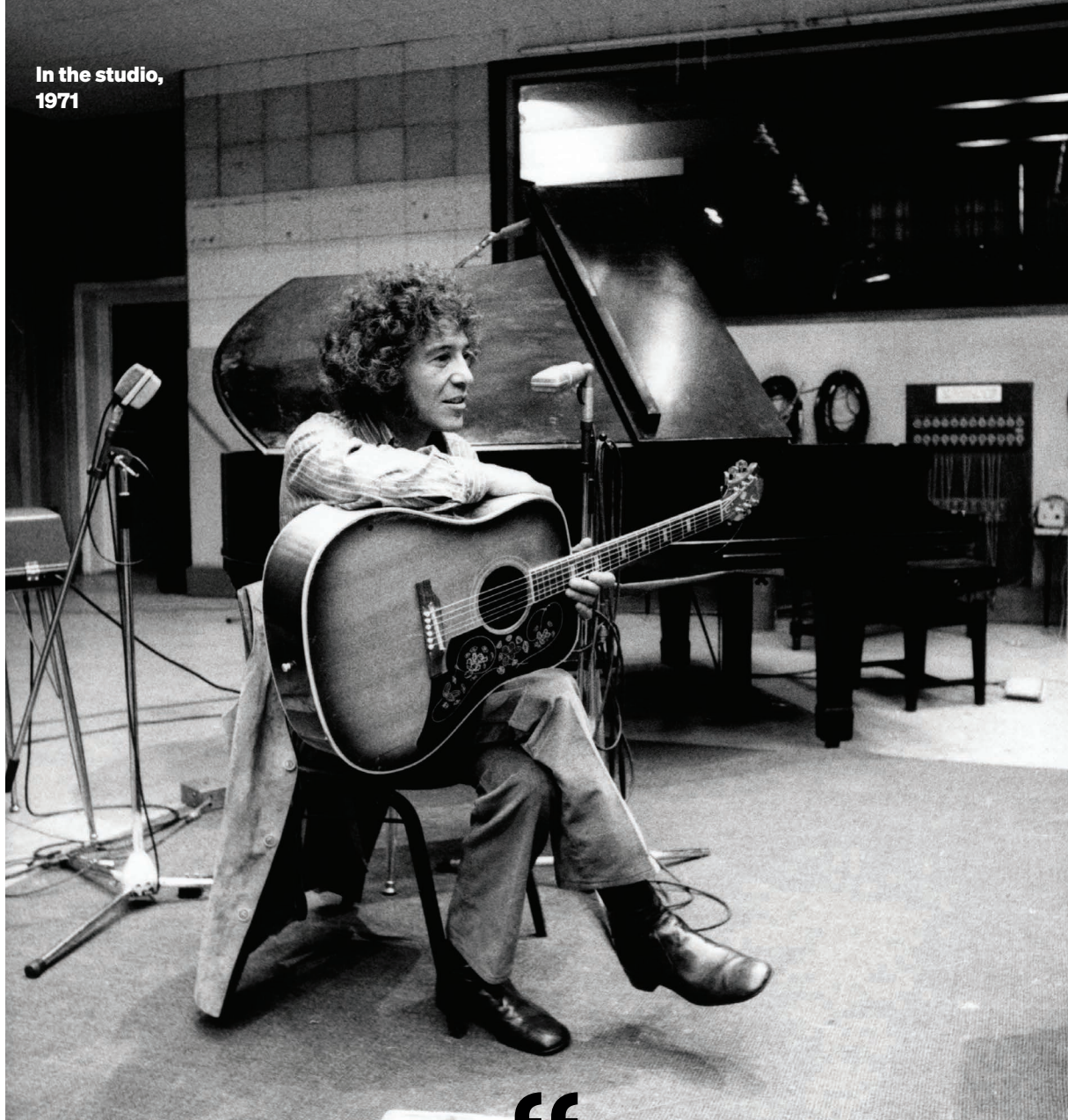
In 1949, Korner got his first professional gig, playing guitar in Chris Barber’s trad jazz band. While Barber was the star, Korner, who had recently seen Lead Belly perform in Paris, lobbied for a thirty-minute slot play-

ing prewar blues during intermission. Five years later, he was recording with Ken Colyer’s skiffle band. In 1957 and 1959, he recorded as Alexis Korner’s Skiffle Band and Alexis Korner’s Blues Incorporated, respectively, for Tempo Records. The tracks featured eight country blues tunes, the majority of which he had learned from Lead Belly recordings.

Toward the end of 1961, Korner and fellow blues aficionado Cyril Davies elected to resurrect Blues Incorporated, landing a residency at a former trad jazz venue, the Ealing Club, on Saturday nights. By this point, in addition to his activities as a performer, Korner had written sleeve notes for albums by American blues greats such as Big Bill Broonzy and Little Brother Montgomery, recorded with Memphis Slim and Champion Jack Dupree, written articles on Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee for *Melody Maker* and Muddy Waters for *Jazz Review*, and served as host of the BBC’s *Jazz Session*, where he interviewed legendary jazz musicians such as Kid Ory, Count Basie, and Charles Mingus.

By March 1962, Charlie Watts had joined Blues Incorporated. A few gigs later, Brian Jones, who was crashing at Alexis’ house, sat in with the band playing slide guitar on Elmore James songs. Keith Richards was there that night, and soon Keith and Mick Jagger were regular attendees, sitting in with the band whenever possible. Eric Burdon, who would later form the Animals, was also a

In the studio,
1971



“

**HE WAS SOUGHT OUT FOR COUNSEL BY
NUMEROUS ROCK LEGENDS HE'D PREVIOUSLY
PLAYED WITH AND NURTURED.**

”

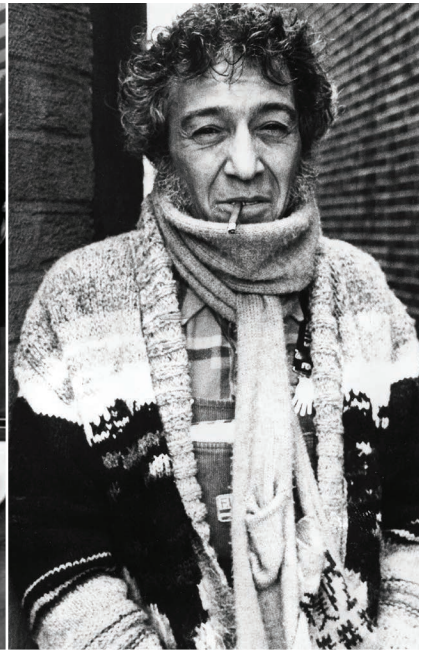
regular guest vocalist, hitchhiking down from Newcastle on Saturday nights to join in the fray.

Blues Incorporated's first album, *R&B From the Marquee*, was recorded in June 1962. Mick Jagger was slated to sing on the album, but unfortunately he came down with the flu and was replaced by Long John Baldry. Perhaps to make up for it, Alexis got the Rollin' Stones (the band's original name) their first gig, opening for Long John Baldry at the Marquee Club on July 12, 1962. A short time later, Jack Bruce and Ginger Baker became the rhythm section for Blues Incorporated. Leaving Korner within a year, after a brief sojourn with the Graham Bond Organization, they would form Cream, alongside Eric Clapton.

Korner was not one to confine blues in a limited way, proclaiming, "We [he and Cyril Davies] were convinced that blues was world pop music, and it was ridiculous to suggest that it was just for a few people with esoteric tastes."

Alexis would record well over a dozen albums. Somewhat of a Renaissance man, he sang lead, played guitar, mandolin, slide bouzouki, and piano, leading ensembles that ranged from acoustic duos to hard-driving R&B bands playing Chicago blues (including Snape, which featured three ex-members of King Crimson) to the gospel-inflected New Church and the avant jazz-oriented CCS (Collective Consciousness Society).

The latter recorded three albums from 1970 through 1973. Featuring at times four trombones, six trumpets, and six saxophone players, CCS stormed the British charts with a brass-laden wall of sound on a cover of Led Zeppelin's "Whole Lotta Love." Two further singles, "Walking" and Korner's "Tap Turns on the Water," hit the British Top Ten. Not content to imitate earlier blues artists, Korner often brought aspects of modern jazz into his approach. A huge fan and friend of Miles Davis, Thelonious Monk, Ornette Coleman, and Charles



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Blues Incorporated: Dave Stevens, Dick Heckstall-Smith, Korner, Jack Bruce, Mick Jagger, Cyril Davies (from left), and Charlie Watts (hidden), Ealing Club, London, 1961; in Germany, ca. 1975; with Bill Wyman (left) and Charlie Watts, the Marquee Club, London, 1983.

Mingus, Korner recorded a blistering version of Mingus' "Wednesday Night Prayer Meeting" and wrote a tribute to Monk and Mingus, which he entitled "Blue Mink."

As a BBC broadcaster, he served in the mid-sixties as the host for *Rhythm and Blues With Alexis Korner*, booking bands whose members he had helped mentor, including the Stones, the Yardbirds, and John Mayall. He also hosted and served as the house band for a wildly popular children's show, *Five O'Clock Club*. From January 1, 1977, until the early eighties, *Alexis Korner's Blues and Soul Show* was a weekly highlight of the British airwaves. With his consummate taste and made-for-radio voice, Korner would continue educating the British public about all forms of Black music. At his best, he would play the music of the Burundi drummers, then segue into a contemporary Al Jarreau tune, followed soon after with prewar legend Robert Johnson.

With Korner a generation older than the first-wave

British blues-rock giants, and two generations older than the second wave, it is worth noting that later British artists Alison Moyet and Tom Robinson also cite Korner as an integral influence.

His generosity of spirit was legendary, both personally and musically. He often encouraged musicians to leave him when better opportunities arose – Robert Plant being a prime example. For his whole adult life, Alexis was sought out for counsel by musicians he'd previously played with and nurtured. Case in point, when the Rolling Stones decided to fire Brian Jones in 1969, Mick, Keith, and Brian all called Alexis separately for advice.

Alexis tragically died from cancer on January 1, 1984, at the age of 55. His celebration of life featured a who's who of British musicians. Forty years later he takes his rightful place in the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame alongside so many of the artists whose careers he was instrumental in launching.