

After decades away from the music scene, guitarist Wally Stocker is back on his feet again and back where he belongs, playing lead guitar with a new lineup in The Babys. From 1977 to '80, the group amassed a string of radio-friendly hits including "Isn't It Time," "Every Time I Think of You," "Head First," "Back on My Feet Again," and "Midnight Rendezvous."

As lead guitarist, Stocker provided the six-string muscle that

powered those hits up the charts.

Born March 27, 1953, in London, Stocker took up guitar at age nine. A passionate devotee of Free guitarist Paul Kossoff, he honed his chops in short-lived bands Joy and Pegasus. His break came in 1975, when he joined the fledgling The Babys, which included lead vocalist/bassist John Waite, keyboardist/guitarist Michael Corby, and drummer Tony Brock. Signed to Chrysalis on the basis of a four-song video, the band released five albums – *The Babys*, *Broken Heart*, *Head First*, *Union Jacks*, and *On the Edge* – and toured with the likes of Alice Cooper, Cheap Trick, Journey, AC/DC, and Rush.

Wally Stocker with a Les Paul goldtop in 2013.

The Babys disbanded in December, 1980, and Stocker went to tour and record with Rod Stewart, Air Supply, and Humble Pie. In 2013, The Babys reunited with Stocker and Brock alongside new recruits lead singer/bassist John Bisaha and guitarist J.P. Cervoni. Last July, the band performed its first gig in almost 33 years.

At age 60, Stocker's playing is remarkably rust-free – his trademark smoky slow-hand vibrato and chunky rhythm guitar colors proudly intact.

What was your first guitar?

On top of a wardrobe in my parents' bedroom was an old flamenco guitar that sat there for years. I used to ask my dad, "What are you gonna do with that? Can I mess around with it?" Finally, he said "Alright." So, I bought a beginner's book and practiced all the time. When I started, I couldn't get the fingering right, so I put it into an open tuning where I could play the chords with one finger. I quickly realized I wasn't going to go anywhere playing that way, so I tuned it and learned to play properly.

Photo: Alex Solca.

WALLY STOCKER

A BABY GROWS UP

BY KEN SHARP

Who were your earliest influences?

A guy named Lonnie Donegan, who performed skiffle music. Also, Bert Weedon, who played a big semi-acoustic on TV. Another big early influence was Hank Marvin of The Shadows. I liked the way he'd play these great melodies on the guitar.

When did you get your first electric guitar?

Not until I was 16. I left school at 15 and got a job working in a factory. I used to cycle to work past this pawn shop and I'd look at this red guitar in the window and say, "One day I'm gonna have that!" And eventually, I did. It was a no-name electric – very cheap, looked like a Strat. My dad had an amplifier he rigged as a baby monitor for my brother when he was born. That was my first setup!

Paul Kossoff was a big influence on you as a player...

I used to go see Free all the time. I was inspired by the sparseness in Koss' playing and his soulful, bluesy lines. He'd work off of Paul Rodgers' vocals and know when to sit out, just leave space for everybody. I applied that approach later with The Babys. I realized that sometimes less is more.

You can hear the impact of Kossoff's vibrato on your work.

It was just so unique, bending in and out of notes; a lot of guys were relying on the vibrato arm to get that sound, but he had it down. He was playing guitar like a violinist would do vibrato on a violin. Koss had this lovely richness to the vibrato, and everything Koss played was tasty and soulful; and that straightforward sound



Stocker and Babys bassist/vocalist John Waite onstage in 1976; Stocker is playing his Les Paul Custom, Waite a Zemaitis bass.

of a Les Paul through a Marshall was very influential on me, as well.

Though I listened to other players like Peter Green and Leslie West, I always came back to Kossoff. Rhythm wise, I also liked Keith Richards, Chuck Berry, and Eric Clapton, especially his work in Cream. I also really liked Steve Marriott's solid rhythm playing and great riffs in Humble Pie.

How would you define your approach to playing guitar in The Babys?

I go for a less-is-more approach. The Babys were very blues-based. We liked the same kind of bands. Sometimes, I look at other guitarists and go, "Wow, I couldn't do that in a million years," but

five Babys albums and it was my main guitar as far as live work, too.

Other Les Pauls were part of your arsenal...

That's right. I had a Les Paul Anniversary model with a flame-maple top and double binding on the body, neck, and headstock, and gold tuners with chrome-plated keystone buttons; the silver represented 25 years of the Les Paul and the gold represented 50 years of Gibson; even the tuners were half and half. I got that from the Gibson factory in 1978. I also had a black Les Paul Deluxe from the mid '70s with cream P-90s, and I had a Les Paul Standard from the early '70s. For a short time in '78, I was also playing a Cherry Red Les Paul Junior I got from a roadie friend. I don't think I played it live; I used it in the video for "And If You Can See Me Fly." As far as

I get more enjoyment in the way I play than being able to go up and down the fretboard all night.

How did a Gibson Les Paul become your go-to guitar?

After I got my first Les Paul, I was hooked. I fell in love with the unique sound, the way it feels and the way it plays; I love the tone and the sustain. It's great for blues and lead playing and it's great for big, fat chords. It's the kind of guitar you can plug into any amp and get that tone. I've never found anything that surpasses a Les Paul, and that's why I've stuck with them all this time.

What was your main guitar in the Babys?

A '68 Les Paul sunburst custom. I bought it new and made payments every week. I used that guitar on all

live shows I've played nothing but Gibsons throughout my career.

Do you still have those guitars?

No, sadly they're all gone. They're the tools of my trade. But because I've been out of the circle for a while, sometimes you're forced to sell something you really don't want to part with. I've had some beautiful instruments through the years. My guitars were an investment and if I could have them all back, it would make for a wonderful collection.

Now that you're in the market for new guitars, what has caught your eye?

Gibson is putting out a limited edition replica of Paul Kossoff's main guitar which he used in Free with the finish missing and scratches and dents. They're also putting out a new model based on Koss' '58 Les Paul. That looks like a wonderful guitar and I've got my eye on that one. It would come full circle if I was able to play something like that.

The Babys' musical template mixed

muscular rock like "Head First" with orchestral, soul-tinged pop a la "Isn't It Time." What were the challenges you faced working within those two styles?

I welcomed the challenge. It made recording even more interesting and enjoyable. When the guitar isn't the main feature in songs like "Isn't It Time," you've got to invent a part that will fit in but maintain the style you wove into a heavier track.

Do you employ a different approach, playing guitar in the studio versus a live show?

Yeah, you start with your basic sound, but you have the freedom to experiment a little more with other tones to embellish the track you're working on. Recording is like painting by numbers; you layer a track like putting a jigsaw together. I liked the way Jimmy Page would orchestrate guitars and incorporate sounds, and that had an influence on me.

On Head First and Union Jacks, es-

pecially, your guitar sound was huge. How was that accomplished?

I refused to use an electric doubler. I'd go back in and play off the first guitar and strengthen the part that way; maybe I'd change the tone. I'd want to make sure the guitars were rubbing a little bit and not be completely in sync, which gives it a much bigger and fatter sound.

Which Babys song do you think best showcases you as a player?

"Dying Man," from our first album. There was all kinds of room in that song for me to stretch out, and I remember John (Waite) and I going into the studio together. As he was laying down a vocal, I was next to him doing a guitar track, and we were just playing off of each other. Another one I like is "Laura" from the first album. Our producers, Bob Ezrin and Brian Christian, said, "Why don't you go off and work out a solo as opposed to playing something off the top of your head? We need something different on this



Stocker in '76.

song.” I went off with the track and sculpted a solo, and it worked really well.

Characterize your approach to crafting guitar solos in *The Babys*.

The producer would say, “We’ve got six empty tracks. Lay down six solos, come back and listen, and we can take what’s best.” My solos were all kind of short and sweet and to the point—they had to say something, but it didn’t have to be very long. It just had to build and be melodic. The solo in “Love Don’t Prove I’m Right” is short and sweet. I’ve always liked the solo in “Run to Mexico” and “True Love, True Confessions”; which weren’t overplayed. They were just enough, and that’s the way I like it.

What were you using for amps, strings, picks, and pedals?

For me, it’s Marshall amps all the way. I used a Marshall 100-watt Super Bass head on all the albums, then later bought a Marshall Super Lead, and finally a Marshall with Master Volume. As for strings, I had a deal with Dean Markley. I had custom gauges – .010, .011, .014, .026, .036 and .042. Picks? I used medium plastic Herco picks.

The pedals I used live were my trusty Roland CE-1 chorus—I liked the warmth of that pedal, plus I could run it in stereo. Instead of plugging straight into the amp, it would round off my sound and give it a nice tone with that slow chorus, close to a Leslie effect. It had a lot more high-end and less growl.

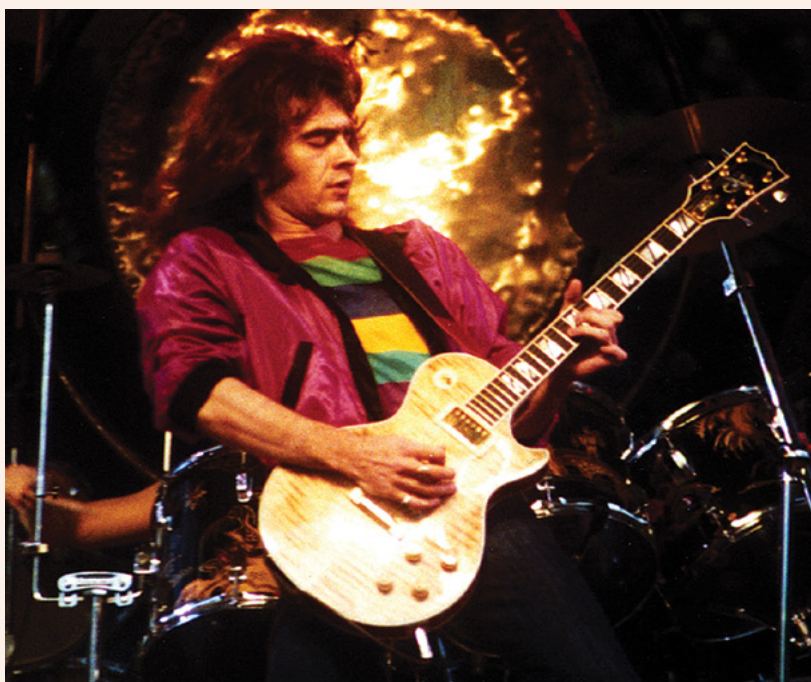
Now, I use a Boss Chorus along with a Boss Delay.

How did the *Babys* reunion come together?

Tony (Brock) approached me last year about reuniting. We’d gone back and forth through the years and this time it finally felt



(ABOVE) Stocker with a natural-finish Les Paul. (BELOW) Stocker in '79 with the Les Paul Anniversary model he acquired directly from Gibson in '78 with a flame-maple top.



right. John Waite decided he didn’t want to do it and wanted to focus on his solo career, and we respected that. We found John Bisaha, who plays bass and is a great lead singer, and we also have a second guitar player, J.P. Cervoni.

Back in the Babys first go-round, Michael Corby and, later, Jonathan Cain, played keyboards and guitar. So, if Michael or Jonathan was playing keyboards, there wouldn’t be second guitar, so that limited me to playing more rhythm during shows. But, a second guitar player frees me to play some of the licks on the original records. It’s exciting to have a second guitar in the band, along with keyboards.

The band recently played its first gig in nearly 33 years. What was that like for you?

It was very emotional, exciting – and stressful (laughs)! As soon as we walked on, I felt I’d gone back in time and I could feel the tension fall away as we started the set. It felt like, “This is where I belong, playing the old songs again.” It was something I never really thought was going to come around.

What’s the most useful piece of advice you could offer budding guitar players?

All the people who influenced me were players you could pick out of the crowd by their style and sound – as soon as you heard them playing, you knew it was Eric Clapton or Jeff Beck or Jimmy Page. That’s what I always tried to achieve. I developed my own style and tone. I’d suggest they don’t get caught up in multi-effects and hammer-ons, because you don’t want to sound like two dozen other players. Concentrate on being unique, as opposed to one of the crowd. VG