

Paul Kossoff: All Right Now

The Guitars,
The Gear, The Music



J.P. James



Foreword

Paul Kossoff: All Right Now – The Guitars, The Gear, The Music is a fascinating, remarkably researched and comprehensive tribute to my brother Paul's talent and memory. J.P. James's fine book becomes a splendid companion to *Heavy Load (2000)*, the definitive history of Free by David Clayton and Todd K. Smith.

Among many, I have always believed Paul's musical gift was profound and very rare. My brother Paul's tragic, untimely death at 25 was not only such a loss for his family and friends but also for all fans of rock and blues music.

Paul's unswerving dedication and passion for his craft was always evident, right from his early teens. Had he lived longer to find himself in a more positive creative environment, I know he would have gone on to be numbered among the very few all-time greatest lead guitarists. I believe he already is. His abilities at that level were already evident during his last few years, when not corrupted by chemical abuse.

Paul was not only a wonderfully talented artist, he was also a gentle, kind and much-liked young man. The entire history of creative musical talent is shot through with similar individuals not fully equipped for all the stress, pressure, competition and lifestyle temptations that are an inevitable part of that life. I am not the only voice to believe Paul did not possess the 'killer instinct' that enables many other artists to withstand those cruel and inevitable pressures to survive and thrive in their creative world.

To so many, dear Paul, you will remain Forever Young – we miss you.

Simon Kossoff
March 2017

Introduction

It is hard to imagine what Paul Kossoff would have been doing today when this year marks the 41st anniversary of his death. In a short career he made a huge impact on the musical community that continues to resonate and his name is often mentioned as an influence from those younger players coming up through the ranks. His tone and vibrato are still examined, dissected and discussed in music magazines and on-line forums, while the equipment he used is often seen as the perfect example of what can be done with very little – basically a guitar and a Marshall amp. But there is more to it than that.

It is without doubt that Paul saw guitars as ‘tools’. He once remarked about not being bothered with years of manufacture, but that if it felt good he’d use it. Certainly, he did own a number of instruments over the years and had a few favourites that he held on to, but he wasn’t someone with a huge collection and what he had he played. While ‘live’ he is remembered for being uncluttered by effects pedals, in the studio he did use different things: amps, pedals and of course the Hammond Leslie speaker. All these are discussed here in a way that doesn’t alienate the reader with technical specifications. Koss himself would only have cared about how it sounded – not how it worked!

J.P. James is better placed than anyone I know to talk about Kossoff’s gear. Over the years he’s owned a number of the guitars and, as a great player himself and an industrious fan, he’s uncovered the history of these instruments in amazing detail. This book springs from an article that originally featured in the Free Appreciation Society’s magazine of September 2003 Issue 102. That 40-page issue attempted to log and trace every guitar owned and used by Paul over his career. It was a massive task and a fascinating read, but our intrepid author decided it was not enough and continued to write and research until the tome you are now holding was ready for public handling. It’s a fantastic piece of work and gives great insight into Paul’s development as a player and musician.

This book represents a lot of hard work over many years and is truly a labour of love. I’m happy to recommend it to anyone with an interest in guitar playing and guitar players, but most of all, if you are interested in Paul Kossoff this is an essential read.

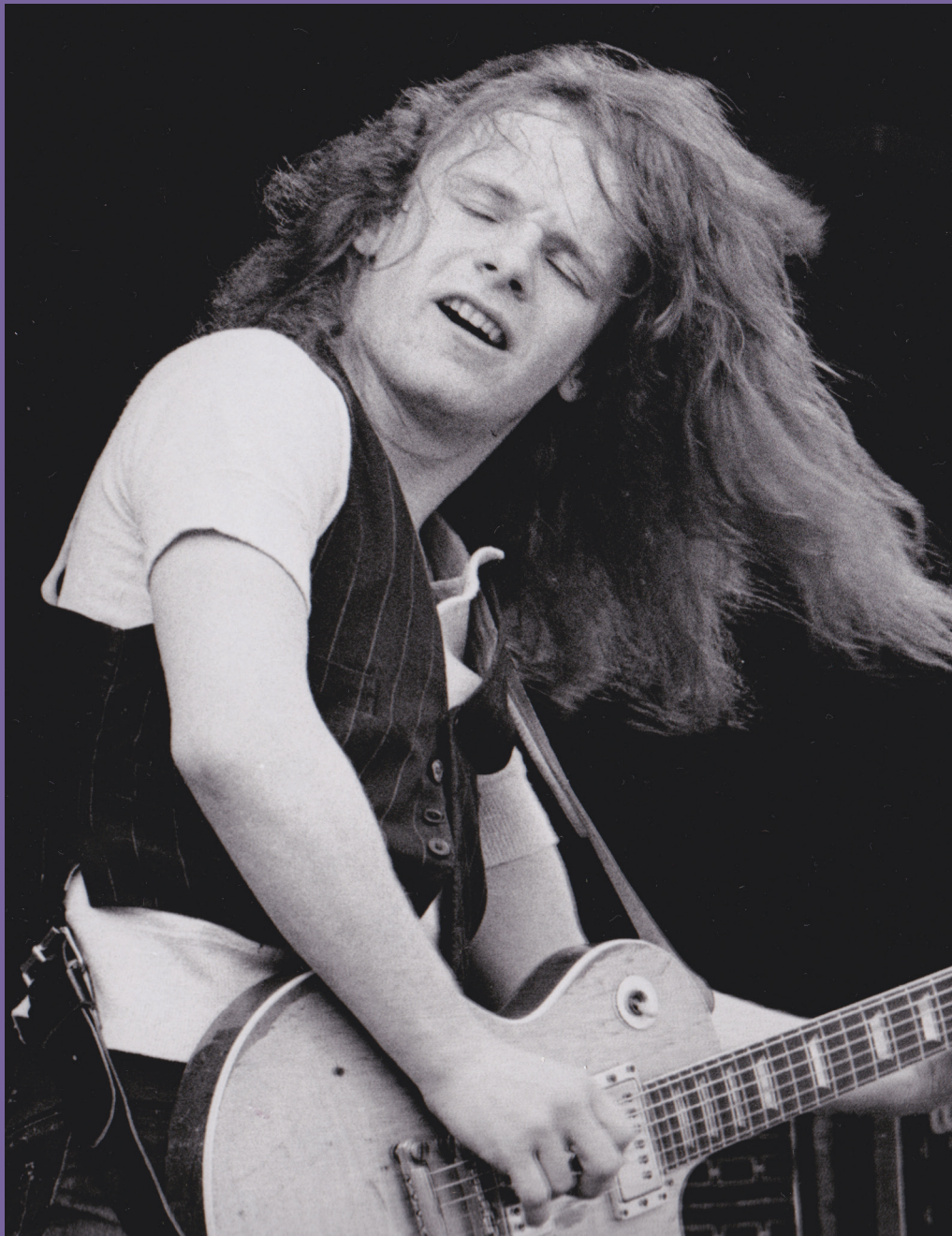
I’ve always maintained that Koss wasn’t the best guitar player in the world – whatever that actually means – but he was and still is my favourite. We miss you Paul.

Sail On.

David Clayton
March 2017

PART 1

The Guitars: Just For The Box





Richard Digby Smith, ‘Diga’, the Island Records studio engineer and producer who worked with Free over several albums, remembers Paul’s set-up in the studio “with his lovely gold Les Paul” (*Digby Smith 1996*).

PAUL’S INIMITABLE GUITAR SOUND

Digby Smith worked on *Fire And Water* and all of Free’s subsequent albums, and in ‘My recollections of Paul Kossoff’ in *FAS*, March 1996 Issue 67, he shares a vivid recollection from 1972 of the natural Les Paul and Paul’s inimitable guitar sound.



“I remember one morning coming into the studio at lunchtime; we’d been working all the night before till the wee hours – I used to just sleep on the floor sometimes at the studio; it didn’t seem worth going home when you’d got to be back in early the next day to do another session – but Studio 2 at Basing Street was all set up for guitar overdubs. We had two 100-watt Marshall stacks, two Leslie cabinets – all these things were all mic’d up in stereo – so we had about 12 mics on this stack. Sometimes we’d use the Leslie. Paul loved the sound of the guitar going through the Leslie cabinet. But we had it all set up there and we could easily switch the Leslie in and out. His main set-up would have been these four 100-watt Marshall cabinets.



“And we’d been doing a guitar overdub on a track, it was probably on the *Free At Last* album, though I can’t recall; *Free At Last* or *Heartbreaker*. Anyway, we got halfway through the overdubs, and actually halfway through a song when Paul was doing guitar come five or six in the morning and we were all a bit the worse for wear, so we decided to just leave everything as it was. Leave the desk; leave the guitar sound as it was, exactly as it was, so we could come in the next day, just switch all the amps on, switch the desk on, put the tape on,

and just literally just carry on from where we’d left off.

“So I got to the studio first, and there was Paul’s set-up out in the studio with his lovely gold Gibson Les Paul out there, and some curious person, I believe an aspiring budding guitarist that was in the building at the time, popped their head into the studio and remarked on how fantastic this guitar set-up looked and enquired as to whose it was. I said it was Paul Kossoff’s and, ‘Don’t touch it because we’re right in the middle of a track and Paul’s going to come in this afternoon and we’re just going to pick up where we left off. So don’t touch any controls. Don’t touch any volume settings, any tone settings.’ But he was very anxious almost, very keen, very enthusiastic to find out even more about this studio set-up, and his enthusiasm was such that I allowed him the luxury of actually putting Paul’s guitar





... picking Paul's guitar up and ... I'd already switched all the amps on so they'd all be nice and warmed up.

"So there this guy was. He was a Kossoff fan and there was Kossoff's guitar sound all ready and waiting for anybody who'd care to play it; so he put the guitar on. I reminded him again, 'Don't touch a single thing. Don't touch one single knob but you can just play a couple of licks if you want.' When he switched all the amps off 'standby' the feedback and the general din and racket was deafening and, try as he might, he could not get a single note out of this guitar! It was just uncontrollable! It was as if it was impossible to play this guitar the way it was set up with the amps and everything so loud. It was like nobody else could play it. It was almost as if the guitar and the amps almost even wouldn't even allow anybody else to play! So he was pretty disappointed because he didn't get ... The only noise he could get out of it was just feedback and squeaks and just a horrible din!

"Dutifully reprimanded, he took the guitar off, put all the amps back on standby, and sort of sulked back out of the studio with his tail between his legs, and possibly as mystified as I was that how come a few hours earlier somebody else had been holding that guitar with exactly the same settings and was making the most lyrical of melodic blues guitar music from it? And somehow or other it wasn't as simple as just picking up this guitar and trying to mimic a Kossoff lick or play the blues guitar or do anything with it.





“About 30 minutes later Paul turned up. He was keen. He was fresh. He was alert. He remembered what we’d been doing the morning before. He said, ‘Let’s just carry on.’ We’d only got the second half of a solo to do or wherever it was we were. I had the tape on by this point and the headphones, nothing had been touched, so we just wound the tape back to the start. Paul took all the amps off standby, he put the guitar round his neck, he got his plectrum and his

fingers, his hand grabbed around the neck of the guitar ... As I say, he switched all the standbys off so everything was ready. We just put the track into record and Paul just played. And it was a beautiful noise. I think it might have been on ‘Come Together In The Morning’; for some reason I think it might have been that track. But Paul had no problem. There was THE guitar sound. There was THE Paul Kossoff guitar sound and we wrapped that track up in about 20 minutes and went on to the next one (*Digby Smith 1996*).”

Digby Smith revisits this episode again in his generous contribution to David Clayton and Todd K. Smith’s book *Heavy Load* (2000), where he recalls the young guitarist’s dismay at being unable to control Paul Kossoff’s guitar rig: “How can he play this? The strings are so thick; it’s so heavy. It’s got a mind of its own, it just doesn’t respond to me at all.” Digby Smith then concludes with his own reflection: “Half an hour later, Paul comes in, throws the headphones on, switched the amps off standby, stood there with the guitar and just played. I always thought there was something about that guitar. It just wouldn’t let anyone else play it (*Digby Smith undated2*).”

(See Part 2: ‘The Gear’ for further details of amps and speakers and Leslie rotary speaker cabinets.)



PART 4

The Playout: Goin' Down Slow



A model of taste and economy, Koss's guitar playing is distinctive because of its aggression and its highly emotional feel, delivered with a maturity which belied his years. Simple yet effective guitar parts, often found in songs of a fairly moderate tempo, were a noticeable aspect of his style, his notes sounding very full-toned, his chords clipped, stripped and full sounding, and with the chunky timbre that comes from heavier strings. Combined together, these elements forged Paul's constituent part in Free's earthy, stripped-down blues rock sound.

On stage alongside Paul Rodgers, with Andy Fraser and Simon Kirke covering the other two compass points, Paul was a major creative force, seemingly unbeatable and certainly quite irreplaceable, as time has too sadly proved. Within the dynamics of the band the bond between Koss and Rodgers was perhaps the most profound; without Rodgers centre stage, the essential loneliness of Paul's role was movingly evinced.

There are three powerful elements in Paul's playing that endure: simple yet effective parts that were soulful and heartfelt, delivered with an intensity and passion as yet unequalled.

He always had something worthwhile to say, he put every ounce of passion in his body into his guitar playing, and he meant it. "You can't say he took it too seriously, can you? That's how a musician should be," contends Back Street Crawler's Terry Wilson-Slessler (*Wilson-Slessler undated2*).

"One of the great things about Koss was that he played every note like his life depended on it," Paul Rodgers declares. "He was *so* passionate about his playing (*Rodgers undated1*)."

"Also the feeling that he wasn't as good as he should be, which any self-respecting musician has," Free's mentor Alexis Korner offered wisely. "And he was a self-respecting musician ... and more than that he was a star, as far as I'm concerned. He was someone who was very deeply involved in playing music (*Korner undated3*)."

"Every time I saw Free, Kossoff had blood running down his guitar," recalls Mick Box of Uriah Heep. "He always managed to cut his finger somewhere during the set from playing so intensely. He'd get carried away and before the end of the night he'd cut his hand (*Box undated*)."



“Paul was a marvellous performer on the stage,” said his father proudly (*Kossoff D. 1976a*). “You stood like always, face up to the lights. Making the faces, the famous grimaces, silently screaming the notes you made, guitar held low, at arms’ length, wrestled with, vanquished, shown its master, on the really bent notes, pulled back hard, as though to bend it to match the note. An ecstasy, an agony, a freedom!” David Kossoff honours his son in his poem ‘Late great Paul’ (*Kossoff 1977b*).

Head back, legs apart in gunslinger stance, “guitar held low, wrestled with, vanquished”, Paul playing to the crowd, giving his all, the only way he knew how, and perhaps finding there a reason for being. His utterly honest ‘giving it all’ approach is why people to this day are still drawn to the young man, perhaps seeing in him and his struggle to live, something of a brother lost.

“As a guitarist, Kossoff was a very special player indeed – as a listen to any of the Free albums will show. His licks were always charged with a vivid intensity, immediately recognisable, and he had the ability to build a solo from something relatively low-key to a raging torrent of sound,” Steve Clarke of the *NME*’s well-chosen words in tribute to Paul still resonate deeply (*Clarke 1976*).

“As far as guitar players go, Kossoff stands as one of the great UK blues players,” David Clayton puts it plainly. “He had a great sense of economy and wonderful taste. There were influences from Clapton and Peter Green but that incredibly wild vibrato was entirely his (*Clayton 2001a*).”

Proclaiming Paul “the emperor of the blues (*Ertegen 1975*)”, Atlantic Records president Ahmet Ertegen, a great admirer of Eric Clapton and Cream, “was enormously fond of Kossoff, seeing him as the next generation in electric blues (*Clayton & Smith 2000*).” “People were starting to call him one of the best blues guitarists in the world,” said David Kossoff (*Kossoff D. 1976a*); and again: “one of the great blues guitarists (*Kossoff 1992b*).”

Quite simply, Paul may be regarded as “one of the greatest blues guitarists to have ever lived,” as *Guitarist* has asserted unequivocally (*Unattributed caption 1996*).

HOW THE NOTES WERE MADE

Sadly, Paul is not here to speak for himself, but he might nod agreement with his hero B.B. King, the King of the Blues, on the importance of being true and playing with integrity. “Do it your own way,” King has said. “When I play it’s like trying to describe something to someone; it’s a conversation where you say something in a certain way. A lot of times I play with my eyes closed, but in my mind I can still see the people paying attention to what I’m doing, I can see them as if they’re saying, ‘Yeah, OK, I get it.’”

“Playing the guitar is like telling the truth – you never have to worry about repeating the same thing if you told the truth. You don’t have to pretend or cover up. If someone asks you again, you don’t have to think about it or worry about it. To me, playing is the same way. If you put yourself into it, instead of something else, then when you get out there on the stage the next time, you don’t have to worry, because there it is. It’s you (*King 1980*).”

EVERY DAY I HAVE THE BLUES

“Free started as a blues band really,” Paul explained. “But none of us wanted to play blues in the accepted way and we were all moving away from it, going the way we felt. We’ve always thought of Free as a unit rather than individuals. When we started most blues groups were doing long solos, which I always found sloppy. We’ve always tried to make it tight ... As I said, we started bluesy and that influence has remained, because of the line-up and because of the people we are. My playing used to be very aggressive and tense. It’s still fairly aggressive but now it’s more relaxed – because the band has slowed it down and made it a bit more melodic (*Kossoff 1970c*).”

“I loved Paul’s playing,” Andy Fraser said warmly in *The Guitar Magazine*. “He was a very basic, emotional blues solo player. He had trouble playing chords and songs, but he had such a strong sense of basic emotions that playing with him was just great. He was definitely unique (*Fraser 1991a*).”

“I’ve worked with a lot of guitarists since Paul Kossoff, and he and I really did have something special,” Paul Rodgers told *The Word*. “From the very first time we jammed in a blues club in Finsbury Park, the



Fickle Pickle, and people actually did say time stood still. You could say that Paul played in a very simple manner – that was his forté. Free pretty much did have that in common – economy of notes. With Free we held back until you couldn't hold back any more and then let it go, and that had the audience listening for the big build. Otis Redding would do that, that's who we were emulating, Otis Redding and B.B. King (*Rodgers 2005*)."

Warming to the memory, Rodgers recounted to Simon Cosyns for *The Sun*: "The gig I remember most, although it was before we were officially Free, was my jam session with Koss at the blues club in Finsbury Park (*Rodgers 2006b*)." "I believe we did B.B. King's 'Every Day I Have The Blues' and 'Four O' Clock In The Morning' and 'Stormy Monday Blues'. There was an immediate spark between Paul and I. We seemed to understand the blues in a very similar way (*Rodgers undated3*)."

"There was a kind of sense of breathing naturally with the music, and it was so great," Rodgers elaborated to Dave Reffett of *Guitar World*. When I would sing something, he would respond with the guitar and it was just such a natural chemistry. We decided we had to put a band together right there on the spot (*Rodgers 2013*)."

What bound Koss and Rodgers more than anything else was their unconditional love of the blues. "We shared a deep love of the blues and were listening to the same records even before we met – B.B. King's *Live At The Regal*, Albert King's *Born Under A Bad Sign*, and others," says Rodgers (*Rodgers 2015a*). "We used to listen to Albert King and B.B. King – especially B.B. King's *Live at the Regal* and Albert King's *Born Under A Bad Sign* – and we'd say that the two of us made one of them!" he adds with a laugh. "The way B.B. or Albert would play and then answer themselves, we kind of picked up on that and consciously tried to emulate that and incorporate it into the music we did (*Rodgers undated1*)."

"I never looked on myself as a blues guitarist," Koss continued. "Even when we started and with some of the new groups today, they're all expected to have some kind of image depending on what's popular at the time. We looked around and saw all the blues bands going around round-shouldered and saying all the things that were supposed to be cool but the music didn't seem to come into it (*Kossoff 1970g*)."

"I think when anything becomes fashionable like the blues boom, when the blues became fashionable, I think a lot of people play and they just hear the surface of it and they sort of emulate the surface (*Kossoff 1971b*)."

“A lot of them [then current British blues groups] just didn’t have any feeling for the blues and it showed in the music. Peter Green’s first group, the three-piece, was the best example of what it [a good blues group] should have been like because they really swung (*Kossoff 1970g*).”

The assured, bittersweet melodicism of Peter Green can be heard clearly in Paul’s thoughtful ‘less-is-more’ phrasing. “When Greeny was playing with Fleetwood and John McVie doing their sort of B.B. King things, it was so perfect,” he concluded (*Kossoff 1976*).



THE EARLY YEARS

Paul gave this succinct account of his early years and the pathway he took into music, first to *Jackie* in September 1970, and then to *Record Mirror* in May 1970. “I used to work as a messenger boy in an advertising agency, and then I worked in a puncture outfit factory supplying the ladies on the conveyor belts with bits and pieces. Then I was a packer for a firm that made serviettes, and after that worked in Selmer’s music shop for about a year (*Kossoff 1970e*).”

“As far as my personal career in music goes, I had training in classical guitar from the age of nine till I was 15. Then I left school and got a job with an advertising agency. After that I toured the country in two short plays with my father and then went to work in Selmer’s music shop.

“It was around that time that I first got inspiration, as such, for the guitar and when I saw Eric Clapton with John Mayall. That was when I first became interested in blues as such. So I began playing and joined a group called Black Cat Bones. I played with them for a year and during that time I got to know Paul Rodgers who was working in a group called Wild Flowers. Together with Black Cat Bones drummer Simon Kirke and another friend, Andy Fraser, we formed Free. That was early in ’68 (*Kossoff 1970d*).”

THE ORIGINAL CONCEPT FOR FREE

For his original concept for Free, Paul drew inspiration from the Jeff Beck Group with Rod Stewart; riff-based songs with powerful vocals, call and response between vocalist and blues guitarist, and plenty of guitar solos. Around the time of Black Cat Bones, “I saw the Jeff Beck Group with Stewart and was very impressed,” he told Steven Rosen for *Guitar Player* in early 1976 (*Kossoff 1976*). Adopting this blueprint, Free’s early live set

