Look Who's Older

Actor **Bill Macy** is 86. Actor **Pernell Roberts** is 80. Actor **Robert Morse** is 77. Actor **Dwayne Hickman** is 74. Baseball Hall-of-Famer **Brooks Robinson** is 71. Bluegrass singer **Rodney Dillard** (the Dillards) is 66. Baseball Hall-of-Famer **Reggie Jackson** is 62. Singer **Joe Bonsall** (the Oak Ridge Boys) is 60. Keyboardist **Rick Wakeman** (Yes) is 59. Actor **James Stephens** is 57. Country singer **George Strait** is 56. Singer **Butch Tavares** (Tavares) is 55. Actor **Chow Yun-Fat** is 53. Actress **Tina Fey** is 38. Rapper **Special Ed** is 34. Actor **Matt Long** is 28. Christian rocker **Kevin Huguley** is 26. Actor **Spencer Breslin** is 16. C

Career crossroads

Colleagues reflect on Eric Clapton

By MARK VOGER CELEBS WRITER

"DEREK." "CLAPPER." "SLOWHAND." "GOD." No, this isn't a sequence of mysterious clues from "The Da Vinci Code." Blues-rock fans will recognize these as nicknames for **Eric Clapton**, 63, from various crossroads in his long career.

And what a career it has been. One of the most important guitarists to spring from the British rock movement of the '60s, Clapton is best known as a solo artist, though his *band* resume is rich: the **Yardbirds**, the **Blues Breakers**, **Cream**, **Blind Faith**, **Delaney and Bonnie and Friends**, **Derek and the Dominos**.

To mark Clapton's upcoming show on Thursday in Holmdel, CELEBS presents reflections of the guitarist from collaborators throughout his career.

The Yardbirds (1963-65)

According to Yardbirds drummer **Jim McCarty**, a founding member of the band, Clapton had already earned a degree of notoriety by the time he joined the Yardbirds in 1963.

Recalled the drummer: "Eric was quite famous, you know, on a small level. He'd been to art school with (Yardbirds members) **Keith** (**Relf**) and **Chris** (**Dreja**) – Kingston Art School (in Surrey, England). He'd played with a couple of bands."

McCarty and company immediately sensed Clapton had considerable musical gifts.

"When we first met him, when he first came and played, he was obviously going to be something special," McCarty told CELEBS.

"He sort of had a certain aura about him and a certain presence and he certainly could play as well as we needed.

"And then, you know, we went from there."

But Clapton's tenure in the Yardbirds was shortlived. He quit the band shortly after playing on its first-ever hit, 1965's "For Your Love."

Said McCarty: "When Eric Clapton left – when we had our first single, 'For Your Love' – he didn't really like that song and thought we were selling out. You know, there was a bit of personality conflict in the band as well."

The Blues Breakers (1965-66)

With the Blues Breakers, Clapton recorded an album that solidified his reputation and became a blues-rock touchstone of the '60s: "Blues Breakers With Eric Clapton" (1966).

ERIC CLAPTON with Robert Randolph ■ 6:30 p.m. Thursday ■ PNC Bank Arts Center, Exit 116 off the Garden State Parkway, Holmdel ■ Sold out ■ (732) 203-2500 ■ www.artscenter.com

The band's leader, **John Mayall**, was asked if he concurs with the album's reputation as one of best blues-rock releases of the period.

"Well," Mayall told CELEBS, "I think it earns its title, really, because it was so different at the time. I mean, it wasn't so different for *us,* because we knew the blues and we knew what we wanted to do with it.

"So our intention, when we went into the studio to record that album, was to do something that represented what we were doing every night of the week on the road. We just wanted it to accurately reflect what we were doing. We just wanted to make a good blues album."

The commercial aspect of recording – which had so turned off Clapton in the Yardbirds – wasn't a consideration in making "Blues Breakers With Eric Clapton," according to Mayall.

"We didn't have any kind of intention of trying to make it commercial or accessible to the public at large," Mayall said.

"Because, you know, everything was kind of pop oriented and had to have some kind of commercial aspect to it, in order for it to sell. We went for the *opposite.* We went for the artistry of it. We didn't even think about it making any kind of a big splash.

"So we were very surprised, actually, at the reaction at the time."

Clapton left Mayall's Blues Breakers in 1966 to form Cream.

Cream (1966-69)

With its powerhouse lineup of Clapton, bassist **Jack Bruce** and drummer **Ginger Baker**, Cream is considered rock's original "supergroup." But Cream's unofficial mission statement was less lofty, according to Bruce.

"It really started off, pretty much, as a *blues* band," he said.

There were foreshadowings of Cream. Bruce had been in the Blues Breakers with Clapton and in the **Graham Bond Organisation** with Baker.

"It was Ginger's idea to have a band," Bruce recalled.

"He wanted to play with Eric in particular. Ginger and myself were not the best of friends at the time," Bruce told CELEBS with a laugh.

"When he asked Eric, Eric said, 'Yeah, I could do it, but we've gotta get Jack in to be the vocalist.' And so Ginger then came to my flat and said, 'Would you like to do it?' I said, 'OK.'

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[1] Eric Clapton (second from left) with the Yardbirds. [2] Reading "Beano" as a Blues Breaker. [3] Cream was (from left) Jack Bruce, Clapton and Ginger Baker. [4] Blind Faith was (from left) Steve Winwood, Clapton, Ric Grech and Baker.

[5] Clapton performing at the Bangladesh benefit concert in 1971. [6] A sober Clapton in the mid '70s. [7] A '90s portrait. [8] Reuniting with Winwood at Madison Square Garden in February.

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Photos 2 and 6 © Polydor UK Ltd.; photo 3 and 4 © PolyGram Records; photo 5 © Apple Records; photo 8: Associated Press

"So we went to Ginger's little house at that time in London and we just set up in his front room. And it was a band *instantly.* There was just no question."

Cream disbanded in 1969.

Blind Faith (1969)

Clapton's second "supergroup" would be even *shorter* lived.

Blind Faith – with Clapton, Baker, keyboardist **Steve Winwood** and bassist **Ric Grech** – recorded one eponymously titled album, played one tour and then closed shop – apparently, after Clapton expressed the desire to defect to another band.

In a 1989 interview with CELEBS, Baker still sounded mystified about Clapton's decision when asked why Blind Faith was so shortlived.

"That's quite easy," the drummer then said.

"We only did one tour, and it was a group called Delaney and Bonnie on the same bill. Eric came to us quite early in the tour and said, *'They* should be on top of the bill. They're a much better band than we are.'

"Stevie and I couldn't believe it! And he went off and formed Derek and the Dominos with Delaney and Bonnie."

Delaney and Bonnie and Friends (1969-70)

If one reads between the lines, it sounds as if musicians on the 1969 Blind Faith tour – on which Delaney and Bonnie was a supporting act – perhaps did their share of partying.

"*Maybe* there was partying?" singer **Bonnie Bramlett** asked facetiously.

"You *bet* there was a lot of partying. It was: par-TAY! Every day, all day long; every night; all night long.

"It's the truth. What can I say? We didn't hurt anybody but ourselves."

Clapton left Blind Faith to become a supporting player in Bramlett's band. This led to Clapton's forming Derek and the Dominos – Clapton was "Derek" – and recording another milestone album, 1970's "Layla and Other Assorted Love Songs."

That same year, Clapton released his first-ever solo album, simply titled "Eric Clapton." A memorable song on the album, "Let it Rain," was co-written by Clapton and Bramlett – though the singer plays down her role.

"I really have to put the ball back in Eric's court on that one," Bramlett told CELEBS.

"We started that song together in Detroit, Michigan. It was a beautiful melody, but the lyrics at that time started out as being, 'She rides, she rides.' They were quite trite, to tell you the truth, but we knew we *had* something.

"Eric took the piece of material back to England and turned it into 'Let it Rain.' He was gracious enough to give me writer's credit. I mean, the melody, I had to do with. But believe me, the lyrics – those beautiful lyrics – they're all his."

Concert for Bangladesh (Aug. 1, 1971)

To hear record promoter **Pete Bennett** tell it, we might not be seeing Clapton in Holmdel if Bennett hadn't interceded 37 years ago in New York – just prior to the Concert for Bangladesh, the historic benefit organized by ex-**Beatles** member **George Harrison**.

"Did I ever tell you the story of how I saved Eric Clapton's life? I saved his life!" Bennett declared.

"What happened was, we had two concerts. In the afternoon, Eric Clapton was nowhere to be found. **Bob Dylan** and I knocked on his door. No answer. You can ask Bob Dylan this. We went down to the limo. Still no Eric Clapton. I went up again. Knock, knock. No answer.

"Finally, I called the manager of the hotel. *'Emergency! Emergency! We've got to get into Eric Clapton's room!'* He sends up two security guards. They open the door, we go in and there stretched out is Eric Clapton, dead. He was strung out on heroin. You would've thought he was dead. Dead, dead, dead!"

Bennett pressed a doctor friend into service – one to whom he had earlier given eight tickets to the concert.

"In 15 minutes," Bennett told CELEBS, "he came and gave Eric Clapton a shot of something. He says, 'Get an apple and an orange right away.' I call room service. Eric Clapton was starting to wake up. We put an orange in his mouth and he started sucking on it. He started coming to."

Before long, a shaky Clapton was on the Madison Square Garden stage playing "While My Guitar Gently Weeps" alongside Harrison.

"George Harrison didn't know what was going on," Bennett said with a laugh.

"If you look at Eric Clapton during the concert, he looks like he's on Cloud 9." C

Clapton's musical collaborators (from left) Jim McCarty, John Mayall, Bruce, Baker and Bonnie Bramlett, and record promoter Pete Bennett.
Bruce and Baker photos by KATHY VOGLESONG

Cannes festival

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SPOTTED AT the 61st International film festival in Cannes, southern France: [1] Dennis Hopper, flanked by son Harry Hopper and wife Victoria Duffy. [2] Eva Longoria and Aishwarya Rai. [3] Yoshino Kimura, Julianne Moore and Alice Braga. ASSOCIATED PRESS