

Mick Fleetwood has spent most of his life keeping the world's most successful band together, writes **Jane Cornwell**

Mick Fleetwood has been walking around Carnaby Street, feeling a little — not nostalgic, exactly; he bats the suggestion away — but re-energised, vindicated. It was here in central London that, aged 17, he got his first job, working the phones at British department store Liberty, gleaning fashion ideas, dreaming of a rock'n'roll future, earning a princely £4 a week.

Squint, and the rangy old roue sitting opposite me in this boutique hotel, a former courthouse a few loping strides from where Liberty still stands, doesn't look to have changed very much in the intervening five decades. He's still a straight-backed 1.98m. His clothes still scream Swinging Sixties: paisley shirt, black jeans and red desert boots, gold medallion, gold earring and big gold rings on the knuckles of both hands. The teenage Mick might not have had the bling — or the neat grey beard and ponytail — but he had the drive to go out and get it.

"I couldn't wait to bounce out of school, being an academic no-good," says Fleetwood, 70, in silky tones befitting his long-ago posh boarding facility in Gloucester, southwest England. "I was a schemer, and London was where it was at. It was this pocket of naive thinking, this creative roll, this attitude, where nothing was questioned. I mean, why do these things happen?" He lets the question hang in the air.

A founding member of one of the most enduring and successful bands of the past 50 years, Fleetwood loves to talk, which is good news for ticket holders to his coming appearances in Sydney and Melbourne to launch *Love That Burns — A Chronicle of Fleetwood Mac Volume One: 1967-1974*, a limited edition tome produced by bespoke publisher Genesis. Pictorially driven, the book features contributions from early band members and colleagues, and an account of Fleetwood's childhood and teenage years, which happened to coincide with the so-called British blues boom.

"It was a time of experimentation in music, in fashion, in art," Fleetwood shrugs, his brown eyes wide. "Blues appealed to a chunk of kids coming out of the war. As young players we were identifying with something that let us express ourselves, our wears and tears and pain."

"We'd go out to Eel Pie Island" (a major jazz and blues venue in the Thames at Twickenham, southwest London) "and listen to bands banging out early Chuck Berry and Bo Diddley, stuff right out of the blues bin. It was a bijou movement that became a tidal wave."

This Mick, a Maui, Hawaii-based grandfather, has seen it, done it, got the T-shirt. But he's still as animated about music as he was when a juvenile drummer in a series of London-based bands called the Cheynes (which supported early gigs by the Rolling Stones and the Yardbirds), the Bo Street Runners and Shotgun Express, which featured singer-guitarist Peter Green (or as *Love That Burns* insists, the "legendary" Peter Green), and a spry rising star named Rod Stewart.

Not to mention John Mayall's Blues Breakers, a notorious outfit whose fluctuating line-up variously featured Fleetwood, Green and bassist John McVie.

When Mayall kicked McVie and Fleetwood out of the band for persistent onstage insubriety, a creatively frustrated Green left too. By the summer of 1967 all three men (along with guitarist Jeremy Spencer) were members of a band named Peter Green's Fleetwood Mac. Their live debut that same year — at the celebrated Windsor Blues and Jazz Festival — marked them out as a group to watch.

"There would be no Fleetwood Mac without Peter Green," says Fleetwood of a man who is to the Mac as Syd Barrett was to Pink Floyd. That is, a troubled, sensitive, allegedly drug-dabbling



DANIEL SULLIVAN FROM LOVE THAT BURNS: A CHRONICLE OF FLEETWOOD MAC

GOING HIS OWN WAY

genius for whom fame and its accoutrements became too much.

"Peter was our internal combustion engine, our focus. He was completely unselfish."

"Later on, when he was asked why he named the band Fleetwood Mac, he said: 'I didn't want to be Eric Clapton, I wanted to be in a band with Mick, John and Jeremy.' He always knew he was going to move on, and he didn't want us to be left with nothing."

Spencer left. McVie left for several years and came back. But Fleetwood has been there throughout, all bug eyes and gangly limbs be-

hind the cymbals and snares, gurning and thrashing through a litany of hits, none of which he wrote. No matter that he has always been at the bottom of the pecking order when it comes to credibility, creativity, (mega) earnings.

Keeping the Mac together has been his life-work — no mean feat given the band's unofficial status as a sort of dysfunctional family, rife with fallings out, personnel changes, bankruptcies (Fleetwood's, mainly), relationship swaps, alcohol and substance abuses, and various other intense lows and giddy, giddy highs. "My father used to say, try and have a humour about what

you do, and if you know you have to get something done then don't feel it's necessary to take the credit." He grins. "That," he says, "would be the crafty side of Mick Fleetwood."

Mention Fleetwood Mac to the person-of-a-certain-age on the street, and the line-up that will probably spring to mind is the one responsible for 1977's US west coast dream-pop gem, *Rumours*, which remains one of the biggest selling albums of all time: husband-and-wife Christine and John McVie; Lindsey Buckingham and his on/off partner, Stevie Nicks; Fleetwood, there with Nicks on the album's iconic black-and-white cover photo, his foot on a chair, a pair of wooden balls dangling from the crotch of his very tight black knickerbockers.

The balls, a "juju" good luck charm and a trademark of his wry stage get-up, date back to an early incarnation of Fleetwood Mac. The blues-playing Mac, in fact, that we're here to talk about today.

The Mac that was based in Britain until 1975 (when they relocated to the US to build on their success), recording albums such as their self-titled 1967 debut *Peter Green's Fleetwood Mac*, an overnight triumph, and 1968's *Mr Wonderful*, which contains the Green-penned song *Love That Burns*, and whose guest singer, erstwhile folkie Christine Perfect, would go on to marry John McVie. Oh, and four of whose songs began with the exact same riff by Mississippi-born blues legend Elmore James.

"We were a bunch of kids playing blues and loving it. The fact that people hadn't heard what we were producing made us something new, though in truth we were just copyists." Fleetwood puts up his hands, you-got-me-guv style.

"If you listen to early Fleetwood Mac it's our best efforts at doing something traditional. We weren't like the Yardbirds, doing weird versions of classic songs. We played classic songs for better or for worse. And got better."

He'd nicked the balls from a pub toilet after a few too many ales on tour. "The whole ethic of blues is slightly suggestive. Suitably, I walked out on stage with these two lavatory chains with wooden balls hanging down, and it just stuck."

The son of a homemaker and an RAF pilot who moved his family from base to base — there was six years in Egypt and a long stint in Norway, where the young Mick grew fluent in Norwegian — Fleetwood was always a bit of a stirrer. This had a lot to do with what he now recognises as dyslexia; at school, unable to commit facts to memory, and with words swimming around on the page, he used to muck around for laughs instead.

"I mean, look, we're sitting in an old courthouse," he says now. "So many jails today are full of dyslexics and unconventional, misunderstood people. I'm so lucky that my parents encouraged creativity in all of us"

His sister Susan, who died of cancer in 1995, was an established Shakespearean actress; his other sister Sally became a sculptor and fashion designer. "They gave me a drum kit when I was 13, recognising that my future would probably be in something artistic."

"My dad liked to goof around on a drum kit or just do this sort of stuff." He slaps out a brisk rhythm on one jeans-clad thigh. "His party piece in the officer's mess was playing wine bottles with sticks. I've no idea if that is why I ended up doing what I'm doing but you know ..." Another smile. "Here we are."

Fleetwood is the first to admit he's not the greatest percussionist ever to have whacked a high-hat.

Early on, when his nerves and a sort of rhythmic dyslexia tried to get the better of him, the ever sensitive Green would sing to fill in during drum breaks, and encourage Fleetwood to follow the beat by anticipating the lead guitarist. It was a masterclass that would prove invaluable later, when the group was auditioning Mac axemen Danny Kirwan and Bob Welch, since Fleetwood came to know what made a guitarist great.

"Peter had asked me to join John Mayall's Bluesbreakers, and when I wondered why he'd want me over the other incredibly adept drummer he said, 'Mick, you play the shit from the heart and it's totally suited to blues playing.' The other guy had got too clever for what they were doing. Peter gave me confidence. He was a mentor as well as a friend."



Mick Fleetwood, main picture; and left, centre, with Fleetwood Mac members Lindsey Buckingham, left, Stevie Nicks, John McVie and Christine McVie