

ROOM AT THE TOP

In a cramped flat above a North London leather goods shop, Joe Meek engineered a pop revolution. Then it all came crashing down. John McCready tells the whole sorry tale.

THE STORIES, NEAR UNBELIEVABLE, ARE ALL TRUE. IN A FLAT ON THE Holloway Road, four people bang their feet on the stairs, stomping their way to a '60s pop Number 1. The microphones that record the din are attached to the banisters with bicycle clips. Sometimes there are singers in the toilet. String sections in the kitchen. In the bedroom, his feet lost in a carpet of reel-to-reel tape and tangled wire, a thick-set man in a cheap suit sets the controls for the heart of British popular music. Even without the rumours of black magic, gangland threats and a pill-popping climax of paranoia, jealousy, murder, and suicide, the Joe Meek story is one of the greatest British pop stories of all time – a bleak B-movie script without a home.

FROM HIS DANK FLAT ABOVE A LEATHER GOODS SHOP at 304 Holloway Road in north London, Joe Meek created some of the strangest sonic experiments ever to gatecrash the British hit parade. A misguided sonic auteur, Meek single-handedly pioneered the idea of independence in the British recording industry by selling his finished products to the major labels and refusing to compromise in the fickle face of '60s pop: "Everything he did in that tiny little studio was an act of faith in something," says '60s band manager Ken Pitt. "Music was his entire life." Between 1956 and 1967, when his creative whirlwind came to a murderous end, Joe Meek released over 300 records, most of them written, recorded, topped and tailed in his flat. The singers may now elude you, but few are unable to recall the hysterical strains of Johnny Remember Me, the infernal racket of Have I The Right?, or the breathless rush of Telstar – the best selling instrumental of all time, untainted even by the fact that it's Margaret Thatcher's favourite record.

Robert George Meek was born on April 5, 1929 in the

Gloucestershire market town of Newent, a location that gave him a cider-curdling West Country accent preserved on '60s radio interviews where he talks of his studio tricks and "delayin' the echo". Overshadowed by his country-tough brothers, his quiet demeanour was probably exacerbated when his mother began to dress him up as a girl. Before his teens he was staging magic shows for other children and dressing up for his own elaborate theatre productions. "We used to call him a cissy," says Joe's late brother Eric, in John Reppsch's exhaustive book, *The Legendary Joe Meek*. "And he would usually fly into a tantrum and storm off up to the shed. He thought we were gross and mad. We thought he was feminine because he would rather dress up and prance about up the shed, doing a play or something."

However, it was a fascination with old radios and record players that really characterised young Joe. Armed with a copy of *Practical Wireless*, he would dismantle circuit boards and build his own electrical gadgets. His talents made him popular. He ➤

Clive Bulby

Joe would rig up speakers in the trees so the cherry pickers could listen to the radio as they worked. A budding DJ, he would travel the countryside with his own mobile set up, playing dances for pennies. When he was old enough Joe joined the RAF as a radar technician, spending his free time borrowing kit to build elaborate radios and tape machines. He began recording small-time singers, using his own acetate cutting machine, before he even made it to London.

His talents unschooled but obvious, Meek moved to the Smoke in 1953 and was taken on by IBC Studios, where he learned the ropes as a recording engineer. Regardless of whether he was asked or not, Joe would try and stamp his sonic style – the result of all those Newent bedroom experiments – on the artists he worked with. He recorded Frankie Vaughan's *The Green Door*, notching up the echo effects while nobody was watching. On trad jazz dad Humphrey Lyttelton's *Bad Penny Blues*, he messed with the microphones so the bass line was distorted while the brushed drums sizzled like frying bacon. Before George Martin had met The Beatles and before drugs and artist input became the norm, Meek's innovations were the roots of a revolution. *Bad Penny Blues* made the UK Top 20 in 1956. Joe Meek was beginning to make a name for himself.

CONCENTRATING HARD ON HIS WORK, JOE HAD ALSO started writing his own songs. Writing home to his mum in Newent with news of his achievements and reports of the supposed jealousy of his colleagues, he was not as quick to report that he had fumbled his way to a relationship with a suave individual by the name of Lionel Howard. The homosexuality that he had kept largely to himself during his stint at the RAF was coming out to play in the shadows of London's burgeoning gay community.

Writing in partnership with producer Charles Blackwell, Joe hacked out an unremarkable skiffle record called *Sizzling Hot*, for the inevitably named Jimmy Miller And The Barbecues. The resulting attention was enough to spur him on to set up what was effectively Britain's first home studio, at the flat he shared with Lionel at Arundel Gardens, west London. Next, he took a job at jazz producer Denis Preston's Lansdowne studios where he struck up a friendship with engineer Adrian Kerridge. "Joe was unquestionably where it all began," says Adrian. "He had no rivals. He was naturally talented and quite simply a pioneer in those dark and distant days. He stayed ahead of his time, in so many ways, until his death."

Meek had such a taste for work he never stopped. He would take Preludin as he constantly searched for new sounds: "He was willing to try anything," says Adrian. "He once asked me for a half-out-of-phase lead. I told him there was no such thing and it wouldn't work. But I had to make one anyway, just to prove it. The technology didn't yet exist for some of the things he wanted to do. He had the boffins at EMI Hayes design him a mixing desk that just confused them. They had never heard of the kind of equalisation he demanded. But they made it anyway and it sounded amazing."

Apart from an obsession with sound, Adrian recalls few conversations which revealed the man, despite the many hours they worked together. "I never had any problems with his lifestyle, but it's hard to imagine now just what a taboo subject his homosexuality was back then. People judged him because of it and he reacted by hating them."

The songwriting continued while at Lansdowne. Joe would try to interest Denis Preston in his increasingly convincing sound sketches. His adolescent doodle *Put A Ring On Her Finger* was recorded as a Tommy Steele B-side, and hit the US Top 50 for Les Paul And Mary Ford. Joe got paid and the money gave him the

confidence to make the jump he dreamed of. Having lined up his own recordings during down time at the studio, Joe formed his own Triumph label in 1960 and released a few non-hits. Aside from a Buddy Hollyesque vignette by Michael Cox called *Angela Jones*, which made the Top 10, they are best forgotten.

The only Triumph recording truly worthy of the name was the *I Hear A New World* EP, which sold so poorly that the projected Part 2 was never even pressed. Recorded at home and at Lansdowne, Joe's groundbreaking soundtracks for Dansette astral travel were marketed as stereo test discs. Speeding up unused group takes and layering them with echo and delay, he would add more icing to the cake than was perhaps wise: special effects like scraped combs, smashed glass, broken clockwork toys, radio interference, backwards tapes, and flushing toilets can be made out. Now fêted by electronic cultists like Orbital and Andrew Weatherall, *I Hear A New World's* genius is tempered by Meek's twisted sense of 'comedy' pop. The sleeve notes show a man innocently obsessed with aliens, the space race, and Sputnik flights into the beyond. The Entry Of The Globbotts, is, "the sound of... happy jolly little beings. As they parade before us you can almost see their cheeky blue faces."

While only 100 copies of *I Hear A New World* were pressed, the EP stands as Joe's outer space manifesto. "Looking back, it's clear that Joe did have a plan for the record," says Dave Golding, who drummed on the sessions. "It was only when Telstar came out three years later that it all began to make sense to me."

Unable to tolerate working with others, and with bills piling up, Joe now teamed up with a mysterious benefactor called Major Banks who, transfixed by Joe's working techniques, bought half the shares in

Triumph, thus allowing Joe to set up his own studio – a little castle where no one could question his sovereignty. With equipment borrowed, stolen, or made from scratch, the rooms above Mr and Mrs Shenton's Leather Goods shop at 304 Holloway Road were secured. With three flights of stairs for budding pop performers to drag their instruments up, it was not an ideal set-up. Sessions were constantly held up by the noise from heavy lorries rumbling along the Holloway Road. Together with the Major,

Joe formed the rather grand sounding RGM Sound. Dave Adams, an accomplished carpenter who was also one of his growing stable of singers, kitted the place out with shelves and work surfaces. Collecting a rent of £7 10 shillings per week, Mrs Shenton had little idea what she was letting herself in for. As she banged her broom handle on the ceiling complaining about the incessant noise, it's doubtful whether Mrs Shenton had a chance to note that her tenant had originated Britain's first independent studio. Combing his immaculate quiff, one eye on the latest handsome bass player, Joe Meek was now the king of all he surveyed.

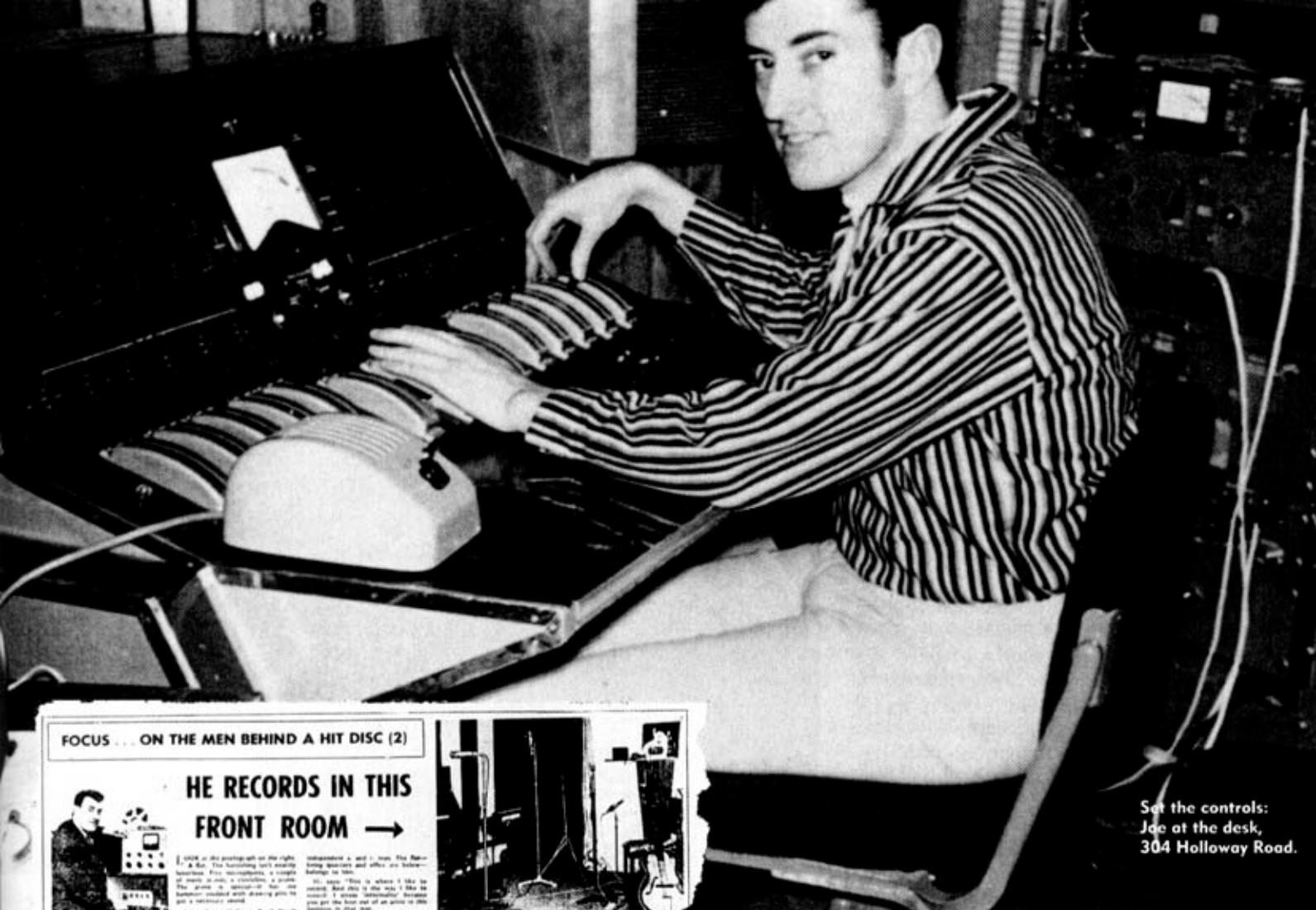
"LOOKING BACK, IT WAS CLEAR THAT JOE HAD A PLAN. IT WAS ONLY WHEN TELSTAR CAME OUT THREE YEARS LATER THAT IT MADE SENSE."



Days of innocence: (from top) bare-chested Joe (third from left) with Newent family and friends; in the RAF; and in the shop.

IT MIGHT ALL HAVE ENDED AS A JOKE WITHOUT a punchline were it not for the arrival of a boy with a Berkshire accent which matched Joe's for comic value. Meeting at an audition arranged by a local publisher, Joe listened intently to the young Geoff Goddard before solemnly declaring, "I shall call you 'Hollywood.'" Goddard (who died shortly after being interviewed for this feature) admitted that he wasn't happy until he had secured the prefix Anton. Anton Hollywood. Class. "We hit it off straight away," said Geoff. "I sensed a kindred spirit. We were on the same wavelength."

Anton Hollywood's career was short-lived, as Goddard's songwriting talents were quickly made known. Working on a quick-buck song for TV actor on-the-make John Leyton, Geoff bashed out



Set the controls:
Joe at the desk,
304 Holloway Road.

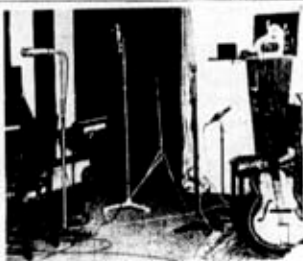
FOCUS... ON THE MEN BEHIND A HIT DISC (2)

HE RECORDS IN THIS
FRONT ROOM →



Joe Meek at his desk in the front room of 304 Holloway Road, London. The room is cluttered with electronic equipment, a keyboard, and a desk. Joe is sitting at the desk, looking at the camera.

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Joe Meek at his desk in the front room of 304 Holloway Road, London.

Johnny

Remember Me "in 10 minutes". A breathless, camp classic, chock-full of orchestral flourishes and

windswept drama, this death disc de luxe would also become the canvas for the Holloway Road studio's most famous session. With a string section on the stairs and singers in the bathroom, backing group The Outlaws crowded into the front room while Joe twisted and tweaked his way to pop perfection, compressors and limiters glowing hot, his Lyrec and TR51 tape machines criss-crossing takes. Chas Hodges was on bass. "I could hear a girl singing but didn't know where she was. She might have been in the bathroom. I heard Joe saying, 'Oh, the violins have arrived,' but I never saw them — they were on another floor in the flat." "The boy on the rhythm guitar," remembered Goddard, "played until his fingers bled. There were people squashed in corners. I remember some old boy trying to find enough space to drag the bow across his violin."

The record was released in July 1961. It went to Number 1 in the UK charts and stayed there for 15 weeks. The industry mocked. Arranger and Melody Maker columnist Martin Slavin railed against Johnny's success: "A recording studio is the place to record. They are there for that specific purpose and they have the best technicians in their employ." Joe could not resist the opportunity to reply in print. "Fair enough, my studio started out as a large bedroom but it is now a first class studio in which I have made many hit records. I would be a fool to listen to an arranger with a bee in his bonnet. I make records to entertain the public, not square connoisseurs who just don't know."

The success cemented Meek's growing friendship with Goddard. "He was a country boy in London, like me," said Goddard. "We had something in common. We were outsiders, I suppose." That bond didn't save

him from the Meek temper, however. Session drummer Bob Graham remembers Joe punching Geoff in the ear because he couldn't stop coughing during a take. "You're only looking for attention," he screamed." Goddard himself recalled arriving late for a session: "Joe called me 'a fucking bastard', I shouted something back, then after a minute this strangled voice came from the control room — 'It's all over, it's all over.' We heard him run down the stairs. I said to the arranger, Charles Blackwell, that I might as well go back home to Reading. He said I should just wait a while. Ten minutes later Joe bounded back in the room with a big smile on his face."

LIKE JOE, GODDARD WAS AN AMATEUR SPIRITUALIST WITH a Buddy Holly obsession. Goddard's interests pushed them to attempts at contacting dead stars — Al Jolson, Mario Lanza, and even Buddy. The sessions prompted Geoff to pen Mike Berry's Tribute To Buddy Holly. Joe and Geoff decided to call up Buddy and see if he thought the record would be a hit. The reply? "SEE YOU IN THE CHARTS."

The record did make the charts, although Buddy hadn't mentioned anything about it peaking at Number 23.

Joe's obsession with spiritualism and the occult next resulted in The Moontrekkers' wonderfully unhinged Night Of The Vampire. Swamped in wind, rain, thunderstorms, rolling drums, and eerily effected guitar, it was banned by the BBC as being 'unsuitable for people of a nervous disposition'. This is the Meek sound at its zenith; his confidence was so high he wouldn't have cared if the whole street began banging on his door. When not working Joe would wander in graveyards with his portable tape recorder, searching for voices and sounds of the other side. One famous recording survives of a cat Joe believes is trying to talk to him. Crossing over to the dark side, but with tongue poked partially in cheek, Joe began recording Screaming Lord Sutch, surrounding the singer with audio montages of creaking coffins and doors, with howls and screams echoing into infinity, wires →



The leather boy: Joe outside Shenton's, ready to make some noise.

held together with chewing gum, a garden gate spring stretched out and nailed to a plank.

Meek's hard work seemed to be paying off, but not without a price. "People say I've been working too hard lately," he admitted in an interview; "that I'm ready to crack up". Geoff Goddard recalled, "He literally drove himself into the ground. He was suffering from mental illness anyway, I'm sure. He once told me, without joking, that he thought something was growing inside his head."

In 1962 Meek's previously nameless in-house band were asked to back Billy Fury on tour. Joe named them The Tornadoes and recorded a band debut called *Love And Fury* in deference to the Mersey marvel himself. Taking a shine to The Tornadoes' German bass player, Heinz Burt, Meek decided a change of image was in order. After watching the horror film, *Village Of The Damned*, with its army of menacing blonde children, Joe sent Heinz to the hairdressers for a rinse that was to become his trademark.

But Heinz would have to wait a while. With the launch of the American communications satellite Telstar, Joe had space on his mind again. Powered by the futuristic sounds of the Clavioline keyboard, Telstar the single orbited into view. Released in August 1962 – despite complaints from the Decca technical department, who were "horrified at its levels of limiting and compression" – Telstar made Number 1 and stayed in the charts for over half of that year.

Pleased as punch and with money in the bank, Joe bought himself a Ford Zodiac and invested in more equipment. His artists saw little of the money. "I don't remember ever being paid for anything," says Mike Berry. "Joe convinced himself that he'd done all the work [and] didn't need to pay anyone."

"I never had any royalty cheques," says Tony Dangerfield, a Savages bass player who became another Meek solo protégé. "But he was always handing out money to people. I remember getting behind with maintenance payments and asking for 60 quid to get the police off my back. He didn't even want to know what it was for. And he would never ask for it back. I think I got more from him than I would have done had he paid me for the records, which never sold very well anyway."

Despite Telstar's success, problems appeared on the horizon when French composer Jean Ledrut claimed Meek had stolen the tune from some little known piece of his own. The record's profits were frozen at £29,000 and the legal arguments dragged on for years. Joe Meek was starting to drown in the chaotic success he had created.

As much a romantic diversion as he was a marketable star, Heinz Burt loomed large in Joe's thoughts. Though rumour still bubbles, Heinz insisted up until his death in April 2000 that he and Joe never got it on, despite the fact that he lived at the top floor flat at Holloway Road. Joe never made any secret of his affection. In his sleeve notes to Heinz's *Tribute To Eddie* EP Joe writes, "Working with Heinz is like adding ketchup to a cold lunch or a cherry to the top of a fruit salad. With his exciting and vital personality, his exceedingly smart appearance, and his healthy clean looks, he brings a refreshing enthusiasm to the studio."

With Meek session regular Ritchie Blackmore providing scorched earth guitar, the stompingly glorious *Just Like Eddie* became a hit. "It's a beau-



Joe in '62: "People say I've been working too hard lately, that I'm ready to crack up."

tifully made record," says Meek assistant Ted Fletcher. "It's almost impossible that he could have squeezed that energy out of the set-up he had." On the merest modicum of talent, Heinz became a star. With pills to keep him buzzing, Joe devoted much of his diminishing energy to keeping it that way.

"Well I must be off/You're not looking so good/See you down the 'Dilly/Not if I see you first"

The Tornadoes' B-side, *Do You Come Here Often*.

ON NOVEMBER 11 1963 JOE MEEK WAS ARRESTED FOR IMPORTuning in a gents toilet at North London's Madras Place. The police claimed he had "smiled at an old man". He later railed against the injustice: "Who wants a fucking old man?" He was fined £15, but the scandal hit the national press. Joe had spoken of such liaisons as "easing the pressure". Certainly he was always ready to ask a young musician if they wanted to "come upstairs".

"Sex was always on the menu if you were like minded and you wanted to get on," says Mike Berry, who recalls the other Outlaws would call him Tweedledum. An 18-year-old Steve Howe had to deal with Joe's quietly predatory ways. "He used to tell me he liked my trousers a lot. Then he would call me into the office. I would always go because I was keen to get on, get some more session work maybe. I was terrified when he would come on to me. It was like meeting some shady guy in a mac in some Nag's Head somewhere." A 16-year-old Chas Hodges, later to rabbit to fame with his 'Rockney' mate Dave, recalls a Saturday afternoon watching the wrestling in Joe's flat. Joe asked him in his quiet country burr if he liked "the wrestling", then made a grab for his balls. Peter Meer, a member of The Hotrods, who recorded at Holloway Road, remembers, "One time he



Meek inheritors: (clockwise from left) Joe protégé Heinz, Steve Howe and Chas Hodges.

Strange Things (L), Redfern, Topham Picturepoint

put his arm around me. I said to him, 'What's going on? He said, 'People put their arms around each other in pubs...' I said, 'This isn't a pub. He looked a bit embarrassed and said, 'I'm just trying to see what you're like. I'll still listen to your songs.'"

Two days after the Madras Place story got out, Meek pinned one of the press stories to the studio wall, but his apparent nonchalance was short lived. People began knocking at his door, claiming he had slept with them, and demanding money before they sold their stories to the press. Joe paid up fivers and tenners, but that simply multiplied his problem. "Everything went wrong after that importuning offence," observed Geoff Goddard. "I heard people had broken into the flat and threatened him. It got scary."

The Madras Place incident prompted the mysterious Major Banks to pull out of their business arrangement claiming an unpaid £15,000 which Joe reluctantly returned. The Number 1 success of The Honeycombs' stair-stomping classic Have I The Right? provided hope but otherwise the walls were closing in. Geoff Goddard was suing, not Joe but the writers of Have I The Right?, claiming he had penned the song. Curiously, Joe sided against his séance buddy and the pair fell out. Bad decisions were made. Tornados drummer Clem Cattini says that the group left a serviceable deal at Decca because Joe hated someone who worked there. To make matters worse songwriter Tony Grinham tells how Joe was also experimenting with LSD. "He said he had had some bad experiences. In one, he saw himself on a raft, lost at sea."

On the edge, Joe no longer even knew how to take compliments. Phil Spector, who was visiting London, called to tell Joe how much he loved his music. Clem Cattini, who took the call, can still remember how Joe shouted at Spector that he'd stolen Meek's secrets. "He slammed the phone down so hard that the receiver cracked." All and sundry were accused of helping enemies plant phone bugs and listening devices in the flat. Steve Howe remembers, "There was an impending sense of doom about the place. There were always arguments going on, with sundry Tornados and even Heinz running up and down stairs, banging doors." At one point, Joe hit upon marriage as a possible solution, seriously considering getting hitched to his singer Glenda Collins. He would always parcel away his temper tantrums when she was around, and seemed to concentrate hard on her sessions. Meek discussed the marriage with other people but couldn't go through with it. He would say that he "envied straight people", sometimes seeing his sexuality as another of his problems. It is said he even took a few female prostitutes to his bedroom in the hope that they might 'straighten him out'.

Joe's nocturnal lifestyle picked up pace once again. He was spotted running along the Holloway Road in his pyjamas, screaming that someone was chasing him with a knife. Another time he was found beaten up and unconscious, hanging out of his red Ford Zodiac. Whether this was something to do with his sexual tourism or something more sinister is open to question. Certainly The



Here came the girls: Glenda Collins and (below) Violet Shenton.



Tornados were approached by the Kray twins who told them they would now be managing the group. The group told the gangsters that Meek managed them and, "would never let them go". One of the pair is said to have replied, "Leave that to me."

NOW BROKE, WITH THE TELSTAR CASE STILL unresolved, yet another disaster befell the embattled Meek. On January 16, 1967 the dismembered body of 17-year-old Bernard Oliver was found at a Suffolk farm. Joe knew the boy and was alarmed when newspaper reports mentioned police were planning to question all of Oliver's known gay associates. Séance calls to Rameses The Great and Aleister Crowley did little to help. His mind awash with pills and

thoughts of persecution, Meek took to dressing completely in black. By February 2 – the anniversary of Buddy Holly's death – Meek had spent days trying to record his young assistant Patrick Pink. Arriving for the sessions that morning, Pink noticed that Meek had spent the night writing notes and then burning them, "in case the spies found them". Expecting the police to call any moment to investigate what was now being called The Suitcase Murder, Joe continued to burn letters and documents, then handed Pink a note which said: "I'm going now. Goodbye." Before Joe sent Patrick packing he shouted for him to send his landlady, Mrs Shenton, up. Joe could be heard shouting about "the book". It seems likely that Mrs Shenton had retained his rent book and was finally intending to throw him out. An argument was heard. Mrs Shenton is said to have turned her back to return downstairs. As she

walked away, Joe blasted her with an old shotgun that Heinz kept at the flat.

Patrick tried to tend to her. He called out to Joe, "She's dead." Joe reloaded the gun, pointed it at himself, and blew off his own head. Both Heinz, who still owned the gun, and Patrick, the only witness, were treated as suspects and subjected to serious police grilling. Joe made the papers one more time: 'TOP POP MAN SHOT DEAD AT HIS LONDON STUDIO'.

"His suicide was no surprise to me," said Geoff Goddard. "It was a logical end to the pressure he put himself under". One of the last dozen Meek recordings that made it to release was The Cryin Shames' poignant Nobody Waved Goodbye. At his funeral in his home town of Newent, maybe 200 people turned up.

Joe's tragic end seemed to compound his image as a deluded, misguided maverick. In hindsight, given the straitlaced milieu in which Joe lived and died, only a man with delusions of grandeur and more could have pulled off his achievements. "For Joe, the sound was as important as the song," said Geoff Goddard. "And I think he was one of the very first people in pop music to think that way. Today people take the creative input of the record producer for granted. Joe Meek did so much to pave the way for that".

Further reading: John Repsch, *The Legendary Joe Meek* (Woodford House). Thanks to Thunderbolt magazine, published by the Joe Meek Appreciation Society, John Repsch, Roger Dopson, John Beecher, Mark Newson, Mark Stratford, Derek Lawrence, Jim Halley, Spencer Leigh, all the artists quoted, and Beatin' Rhythm and Vinyl Revival Records, Manchester.

"JOE WAS EXPERIMENTING WITH LSD. HE SAID HE HAD HAD SOME BAD EXPERIENCES. IN ONE, HE SAW HIMSELF ON A RAFT, LOST AT SEA."



See you in the papers: Joe's tabloid epitaphs.