prologue

I was onstage at the Latino club in South Shields when I realized I couldn't take it anymore. It was one of those supper clubs that were all over Britain in the sixties and seventies, all virtually identical: people dressed in suits, seated at tables, eating chicken in a basket and drinking wine out of bottles covered in wicker; fringed lampshades and flock wallpaper; cabaret and a compère in a bow tie. It felt like a throwback to another era. Outside, it was the winter of 1967, and rock music was shifting and changing so fast that it made my head spin just thinking about it: The Beatles' *Magical Mystery Tour* and The Mothers of Invention, *The Who Sell Out* and *Axis: Bold As Love,* Dr John and *John Wesley Harding.* Inside the Latino, the only way you could tell the Swinging Sixties had happened at all was because I was wearing a kaftan and some bells on a chain around my neck. They didn't really suit me. I looked like a finalist in a competition to find Britain's least convincing flower child.

The kaftan and the bells were Long John Baldry's idea. I was the organ player in his backing band, Bluesology. John had spotted all the other r'n'b bands going psychedelic: one week you'd go and see Zoot Money's Big Roll Band playing James Brown songs, the next you'd find they were calling themselves Dantalian's Chariot, wearing white robes onstage and singing about how World War Three was going to kill all the flowers. He'd decided we should follow suit, sartorially at least. So we all got kaftans. Cheaper ones for the backing

musicians, while John's were specially made at Take Six in Carnaby Street. Or at least, he thought they were specially made, until we played a gig and he saw someone in the audience wearing exactly the same kaftan as him. He stopped in the middle of a song and started shouting angrily at him – 'Where did you get that shirt? That's *my* shirt!' This, I felt, rather ran contrary to the kaftan's associations with peace and love and universal brotherhood.

I adored Long John Baldry. He was absolutely hilarious, deeply eccentric, outrageously gay and a fabulous musician, maybe the greatest 12-string guitarist the UK has ever produced. He'd been one of the major figures in the British blues boom of the early sixties, playing with Alexis Korner and Cyril Davies and The Rolling Stones. He had an encyclopedic knowledge of the blues. Just being around him was an education: he introduced me to so much music I'd never heard before.

But more than that, he was an incredibly kind, generous man. He had a knack of spotting something in musicians before anybody else could see it, then nurturing them, taking the time to build their confidence. He did it with me, and before that he'd done it with Rod Stewart, who'd been one of the singers in Steampacket, John's previous band: Rod, John, Julie Driscoll, Brian Auger. They were incredible, but then they split up. The story I heard was that one night after a gig in St-Tropez, Rod and Julie had an argument, Julie threw red wine over Rod's white suit–I'm sure you can imagine how well *that* went down – and that was the end of Steampacket. So Bluesology had got the gig as John's backing band instead, playing hip soul clubs and blues cellars all over the country.

It was great fun, even if John had some peculiar ideas about music. We played the most bizarre sets. We'd start out doing really hard-driving blues: 'Times Getting Tougher Than Tough', 'Hoochie Coochie Man'. The audience would be in the palm of our hand, but then John would insist we played 'The Threshing Machine', a sort of smutty West Country