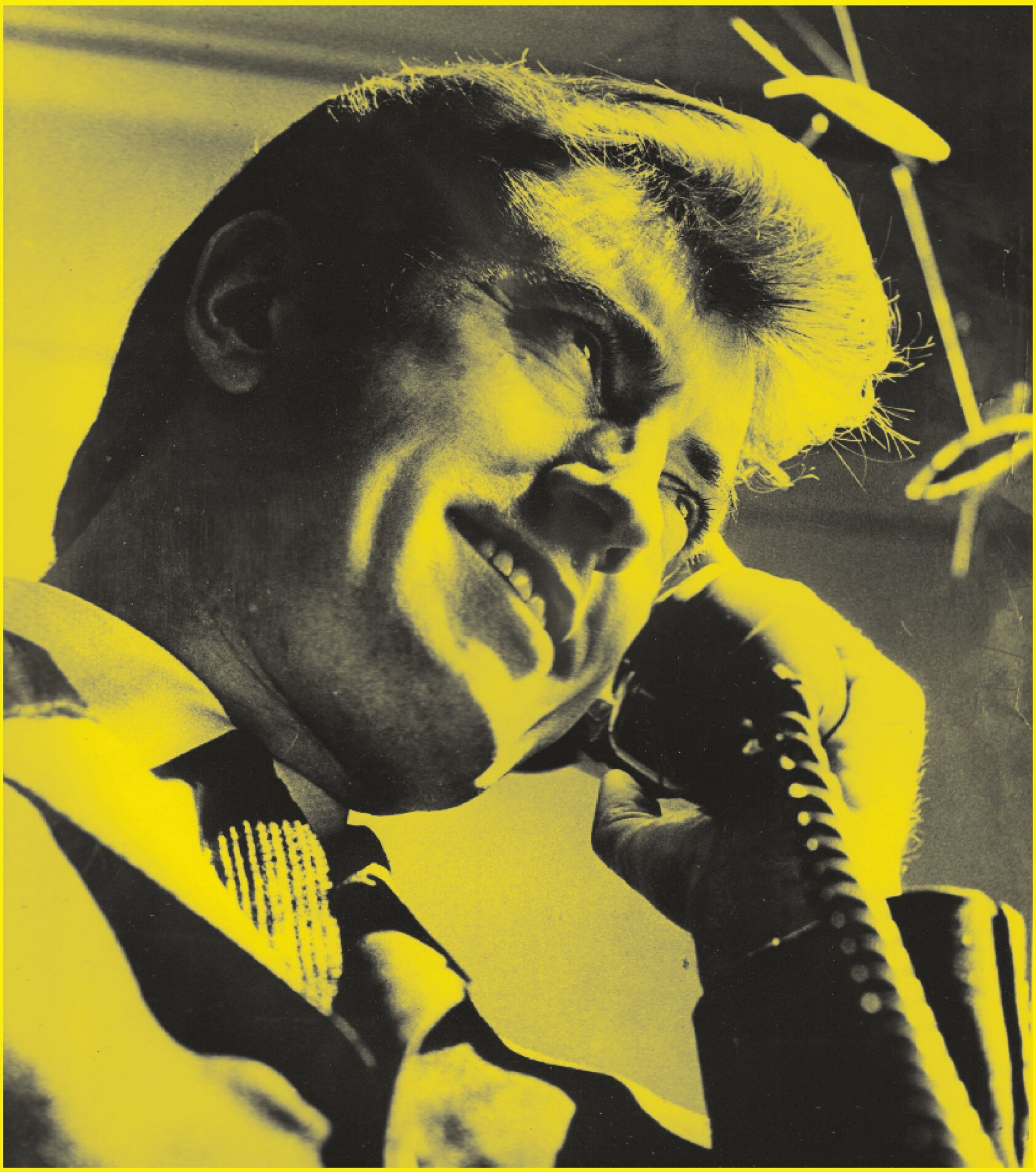
NO ORDINARY JOE



Hidden away for decades, Joe Meek's near-mythical "tea chest tapes" have finally seen the light of day, revealing much about the working practices of the legendary producer responsible for The Tornados' pioneering, electronically hued 1962 single, 'Telstar'

WORDS: JEREMY BLACKMORE

The unassuming consignment of two tonnes of packing boxes that arrived at the Western Star Studios near Bath in September 2020 seemed unlikely to reveal the working methods of one of the earliest pioneers of electronic sound. But the cargo was a unique treasure trove of musical history – the life's work of maverick producer, sound engineer and composer Joe Meek.

After Meek's untimely death at the age of 37, the famed "tea chest tapes" were rescued by Cliff Cooper, boss of Orange Amplifiers and whose band, The Millionaires, Meek had produced. After Cooper sold them on to record label Cherry Red in 2020, producer Alan Wilson and tape expert Martin Nichols spent the next 18 months painstakingly restoring and digitising the material, ready to share with an eager Meek fan base.

Wilson and Nichols faced a vast task. There were 1,864 individual 10-inch reels containing 10,000 separate takes. All were recorded at Meek's makeshift studio in his living room, situated above a leather goods shop at 304 Holloway Road, London, between late 1960 and his death in February 1967. It was a remarkable work rate at a time when home studios had yet to be conceived.

The tea chest tapes, so-called because they were sold in 67 tea chests, hold riches ranging from rock 'n' roll to freakbeat and psychedelia. Masters and signature chart hits such as 'Telstar' by The Tornados and John Leyton's echo-laden Number One, 'Johnny Remember Me', jostle for space with a host of previously unheard gems, from demo recordings by David Bowie's first band, The Konrads, to the 15-year-old Mark Feld, who would later become famous as Marc Bolan.

There are also several hours of Meek's adventures in electronic noise, including long ambient soundscapes and drones, unearthly effects, heavily processed and overdubbed drum tracks, and experiments with electronic organs – music that was years ahead of its time.

For Wilson, a lifelong Joe Meek enthusiast, assisting with the restoration was a real dream come true.

"It was an amazing experience to handle and finally get to listen to these recordings," he says. "I'd known of their existence but never dreamed I'd ever see or hear them, let alone be part of this project. It has been described as the most important haul in decades, so it felt quite a responsibility, not only to Cherry Red, who bought the tapes, but also to Joe Meek and to British music heritage."

Meek's interest in electronics and sound manipulation began as a teenager in the Gloucestershire market town of Newent, where he experimented with modified recorders and compiled his own effects tapes to use in productions by his local dramatic society. Such things were largely unheard of at the time.

"We don't really know how he achieved a lot of these sound manipulation effects, but he was very much ahead of the game, in the UK at least," says Meek historian Rob Bradford, who worked alongside Wilson to catalogue the archive. "In theory, he could have found employment at the BBC and become one of the top people, but that was probably just too narrow for him."

Meek moved into sound engineering in the 1950s and showed a flair for innovation – such as using compression on Humphrey Lyttelton's 'Bad Penny Blues'. Forming the short-lived Triumph Records label in 1960 allowed him to fully indulge both his passion for sound and lifelong obsession with outer space. An EP followed – an extract from Meek's intended "outer space music fantasy", entitled 'I Hear A New World', which draws parallels with Bebe and Louis Barron's groundbreaking, futuristic electronic score for the 1956 film, 'Forbidden Planet'.

But while the Barrons had an electronic sound studio and capital behind them, Meek had to develop his own effects and techniques from scratch on a shoestring. Describing his work as an attempt to "create a picture in music of what could be up there in outer space", he crafted otherworldly sounds over a basic rhythm track provided by skiffle band The Blue Men.

"He was capable of producing electronic sounds by using a sort of tone generator he built himself and shorting out electrical circuits, then manipulating it," says Bradford.

"People in the Joe Meek Society have spent countless hours trying to analyse the effects. He was always experimenting with recording something, manipulating it, then playing it backwards and recording it again. While some sounds were obvious, such as distorted rattling chains, with most it's very difficult to untangle what the original source might have been."

In 1960, Meek formed RGM Sound (later called Meeksville Sound) while living at Holloway Road and also working as an independent producer, leasing a continuous stream of recordings to the major labels.

Over the next six years, an endless procession of artists made their way up the winding wooden stairs to Meek's homespun studio. With drums set up in the fireplace and an echo chamber in the toilet, it was a far cry from Abbey Road, where George Martin had a team of assistants, sound recordists, engineers and tape operators on hand. But from this most unlikely of settings sprang a one-man hit factory, producing records with a unique sound that stood out at a time when rock 'n' roll still held sway.

But for Cliff Cooper's timely intervention, Meek's suicide in 1967 – after shooting dead his landlady, Violet Shenton, in a row over the rent – may have led to the loss of his precious archive. Cooper, who was in the process of building Orange Studios and seeking to capture some of the producer's magic, met with a solicitor handling Meek's estate to see if he could buy some of his recording equipment. The solicitor offered to sell Cooper the physical tapes as he couldn't bring himself to destroy them.

After 52 years as careful custodian, there was a feeling of closure when Cooper sold the collection on to Cherry Red, reassured that the label would release a wide range of material from it rather than focus purely on the big names.

Although Cooper had diligently preserved the tapes at an even temperature in his studios, they had inevitably deteriorated over time. This presented a number of challenges for Wilson and Nichols, who had to work with specialist equipment to clean them before they could start turning them into stable digital files.

The tapes themselves tell us much about Meek's working methods. There were many different types, with various manufacturers, thicknesses and chemical compositions. Meek had used several tape machines, too – mono, half-track and quarter-track – and even different recording speeds and equalisation settings, requiring other heads/machines and adjustments for correct playback.

To make matters worse, there was no technical documentation, and reels often contained both mono and stereo recordings. Meek reused tapes many times, so each track or session on a reel needed individual attention and alteration. For optimal sound quality, sections often had to be played back on different machines.

Several things stand out from listening to the collection – particularly how Meek would record five or six takes of a track and then blade together the best bits from each to make one great composite track.

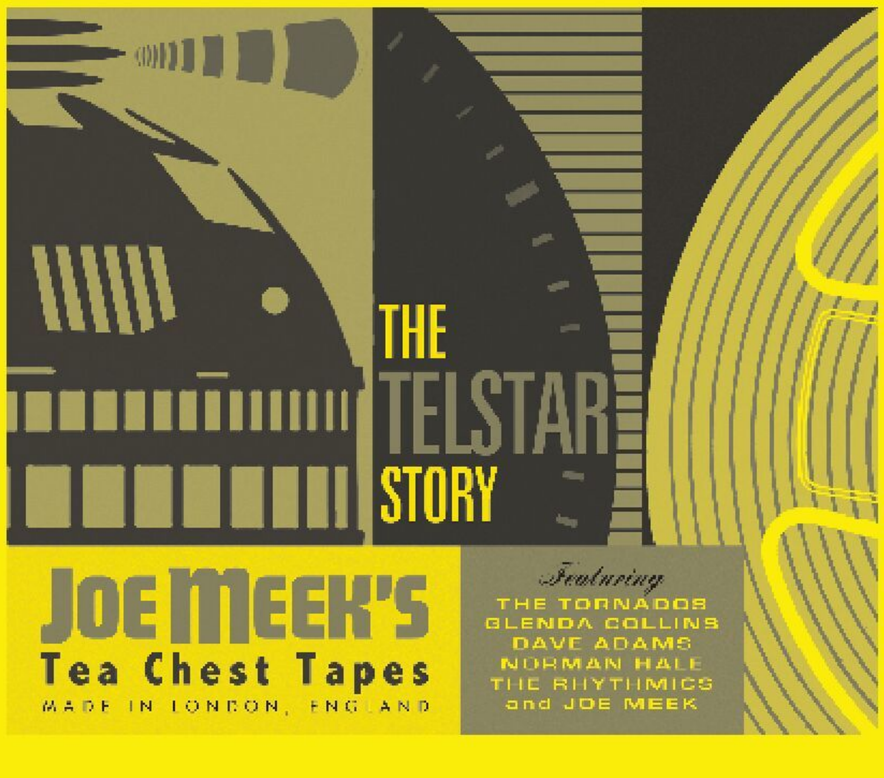
"He was clearly inventive and had the necessary ear for judging a performance," says Nichols. "This was essential for layering – bouncing from one tape machine to another while adding live musicians and singers, all as a continuous 'take'.

"However, I get the feeling that his technical handling was more chaotic than considered. We were struck by the lack of consistency in recording levels in his various sessions. The narrow window for optimal sound quality on these early tape machines – and tape of that vintage – may have produced the distortions that often characterised his work, possibly quite unintentionally."

Meek's reliance on second-hand tape suggests that budget was an issue. Large studios had access to dedicated chambers or plates, which offered excellent quality reverb. On the other hand, Meek had to make do with a simple spring-line unit (with a very twangy sound) for adding artificial reverb, or rely on the relatively small sound of the bathroom or stairwell with the performers positioned accordingly (the beat underpinning 'Have I The Right?', the 1964 single by The Honeycombs, was accentuated by the band stomping their feet on the staircase). It's clear from the collection that Meek frequently applied different amounts of echo or reverb to each track, pushing effects to the max.

"He made the best of these options, using them to add character," adds Nichols. "But I'm sure he would have loved access to something better. This probably explains his heavier reliance on tape echo – easy to achieve, better quality, less twang and opening the door to rhythmic effects."

"You couldn't believe he could get the sounds he did with the studio set-up he had," enthuses Tornados drummer Clem Cattini. "As far as sound was concerned, Joe Meek was a genius."



Born out of Meek's space obsession, the archive provides an intriguing aural record of the making of 'Telstar' and its progression from rough demos, through various overdub stages, to the final edited single.

Meek was one of millions who watched the first live TV transmission between the UK and the US in July 1962, courtesy of the Telstar satellite launched on top of a Thor-Delta rocket.

As Bradford says in his sleeve notes for Cherry Red's 2022 vinyl release, 'Joe Meek's Tea Chest Tapes: The Telstar Story', this was a remarkable technological innovation, and one that Meek could not shake from his head as he went to bed that night. He woke at around 5am, says Bradford, "with the beginnings of an insistent melody whirling around his mind".

Unable to play an instrument or notate music, Meek rushed downstairs to the studio and began humming and wailing his ideas onto tape. Over the next five days, his team of session musicians made sense of them, trying a variety of approaches to see what worked best. Amazingly, all of these recordings survived, allowing Bradford to piece together the whole story.

They include a piano demo by The Tornados' original keyboard player, Norman Hale, who became the first person to record 'Telstar' after Meek persuaded him to perform a demo on the jangly studio piano.

Dave Adams, who worked with Meek from 1958 to 1967, was later asked by him to record a clavioline demo of 'Telstar' over a Mike Berry backing track (Bradford says Meek had an "obsessive affinity" with the unique sound of the clavioline, the electronic keyboard which provided the eerie solo on Del Shannon's 1961 smash hit, 'Runaway'). A version of this can also be heard on 'The Telstar Story'.

Energised by the sessions, Meek ordered The Tornados back from a summer season with Billy Fury in Great Yarmouth to record at Holloway Road. After a long drive following a late-night gig, the sleep-deprived group set to work on a Sunday morning with Meek's howling demo played to them as a guide.

Cattini says the band first had to figure out the track's structure. He came up with the idea of using a rolling rhythm and the key change, while guitarist Alan Caddy worked out all the chords and Roger LaVern played electric organ.

But, unknown to the band, Meek still wasn't satisfied. He called in songwriter Geoff Goddard, and over the course of a six-hour session, overdubbed clavioline, additional piano parts and other instruments. The following day, Meek experimented with different mixes and edits, added esoteric effects (with some electronic sounds taken from 'I Hear A New World') and sped the track up slightly.

Exactly a week after Telstar's launch, Meek fired his acetates over to Decca, who – sensing the enormous public interest in the satellite – decided to rush-release the single. It was a wise decision. Not only did 'Telstar' top the UK charts for five weeks and end up as the best-selling single of 1962, it was also the first song by a British group to become Number One in the US.

The Tornados re-recorded 'Telstar' several times over the years in multitrack studios with computer technology. Cattini admits that they never got close to the sound Meek achieved.

While the tea chest tapes feature many of the usual artists associated with Meek – his protégé Heinz, Screaming Lord Sutch, John Leyton, Mike Berry, The Tornados and The Outlaws (whose ever-changing line-up included Ritchie Blackmore, who would later co-found Deep Purple, and Chas Hodges, who later became half of rockney duo Chas & Dave) – cataloguing them has required some top-grade detective work from Rob Bradford. Meek wrote very little on the tape boxes and the words seldom matched the contents. While Bradford has been able to identify a fair amount, many tracks may never be confirmed, given the sheer number of artists Meek recorded or brought in to overdub.

What do the recordings tell us about Meek the man? His temper was said to be legendary, yet while Clem Cattini said the pair had a number of disagreements, Alan Wilson claims that the material only shows Meek discussing things calmly, offering advice and constructive suggestions on ways to get a good take.

"Considering that so many sessions have survived in their entirety, I have not heard him raising his voice even once," adds Bradford. "I'm not saying Meek never did lose his temper, but it doesn't seem as common an occurrence as people might think."

One quiet moment captures his naive and charming musical philosophy. Trying to reassure a singer who was recording quasi-religious songs aimed at an older market, Meek talked about what he was hoping to achieve.

"All I've ever wanted to do with my music is just make good recordings, hope there are people listening and make them happy."

'Joe Meek's Tea Chest Tapes: The Telstar Story' is out now on Cherry Red