

*“Nothing but the best, and later for the rest.” -John Lee Hooker*

It’s hard not to recommend the recently released 1974 John Lee Hooker concert film *Cook With The Hook* on the music alone. The only caveat is that you will quickly wish it was the music alone. The footage is black and white and grainy, but that’s not a problem. The roughness gives the concert just the right kind of patina, an unearthed treasure that is perfect for the gritty bluesman. The problem is that at some point, the three-camera shoot was edited in a way that makes it at best uncomfortable to watch. The camera is constantly jerked around, and the shots are quickly strobed together and overlaid for much of the performance. By the end of the truly amazing set I had to simply listen to the DVD. It really is that unwatchable, like trying to read a newspaper sitting on an ocean buoy in the middle of a hurricane.

But stay put, really, because the disc is worth it. The set is unique, especially given that there are dozens of greatest hits albums for Hooker, each sporting a slightly different recording of his hits. There are only five songs on this disc if you don’t count the medley encore, but Hooker seems to be improvising his old favorites on the spot. It starts off low key, with the slow ramblings of “It Serves Me Right To Suffer.” Hooker has a tight backing band, and he seems at home the second he starts playing. From there on out the concert is all grind: “Sweet, Sweet Thing” and “Boom Boom” are both long on jamming and short on lyrics — which is what makes these versions of such familiar songs so worth it.

There are a couple of key points where those familiar with the lyrics will be caught off guard, as Hooker seems to stutter through a word or phrase, spitting them out with a visceral effort that makes the performance sting. He’s clearly not there going through the motions on those old tunes. It’s almost as if he’s pushing the listener back against a wall and saying, “I know you know these songs, but shut up and listen again, because they still have something more to tell you.”

The highlight is definitely a nearly 18-minute version of a track labelled simply as “Boogie,” although you may hear elements of his first hit “Boogie Chillin” in it. His band is in full stride, and Hooker puts down his guitar to stand, commanding the audience like a revivalist minister: “I want y’all to get higher, a little bit higher, a little bit higher,” all with his hands raised. He calls out audience members by articles of clothing and gives them individual direction on shaking, dancing, being.

There’s no doubt the concert is an important historical archive. It’s really unfortunate that they didn’t stick to the one camera on this, because the performance is powerful. For any fans of Johnny Lee this is a must, and for fans of blues period — you don’t have to watch, but you really should listen.

[\(Music Video Distributors, PO Box 280, Oaks, PA 19456\)](#)

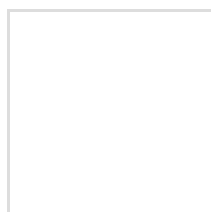
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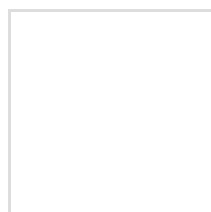
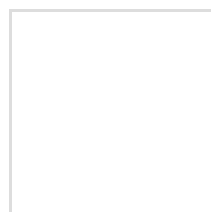


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