

## Tuesday, July 28, 2009

### [John Mayall's Bluesbreakers - Live At Iowa State University](#)

This concert performance by the 1987 edition of the Bluesbreakers serves as a telling example of why John Mayall has never quite become famous, yet has been able to keep a substantial career going for some 45 years or so.


John Mayall has become most renowned for discovering and nurturing the talents of a surprising number of British blues and rock heroes. Eric Clapton came to his early maturity after leaving the Yardbirds for the Bluesbreakers. While with Mayall, Clapton played alongside Jack Bruce, which led to the formation of Cream. The original lineup of Fleetwood Mac was rife with Mayall alumni. Mick Taylor became a Rolling Stone after his turn as a Bluesbreaker. These are the best-known names, but many more Mayall veterans have enjoyed at least a modicum of success over the years.

This 1987 edition of the band is no exception, with two bona fide blues-stars-to-be in the lineup, both of them Americans. Walter Trout had already spent time with Canned Heat before he joined Mayall, but it was turn as a Bluesbreaker that built his reputation to the point where he was able to step away in 1989 and start his own hugely successful career. And no wonder - his guitar scorches with such intensity in this Iowa State performance, I'm surprised it doesn't burn a hole in the disc! The second guitarist in the band was Coco Montoya, still putting in his apprenticeship, but taking advantage of a few opportunities to show off his potential in the process.

Yet while Mayall is the leader and the musician featured most prominently throughout, he leaves this viewer with somewhat more ambiguous feelings. He acquits himself well on harmonica, keyboards, and occasional guitar, but he's not really a technical master of any of them - good enough, but not great. He obviously knows his blues, and makes all the right moves. But in the end, he comes across, perhaps not as a lightweight, but certainly a lighter weight than Trout and Montoya, just as he was a lighter weight than the famous 60's rock stars he spawned. Still, he's an effective entertainer, puts on a good show, and keeps the audience (as well as this reviewer) coming back for more.

BUT - and it's a crucial "but" - he simply is not, has never been, and at age 76 (in 2009), most likely never will be a great singer. His voice is bland, lacking in power and presence. If he indeed feels the emotion of the songs, he fails to communicate that feeling to the listener. He's not so objectionable a singer that you want to scream at your screen, you simply wish he could be better. The thing is, in the long run, he's an enjoyable performer - not a genius, just an enjoyable performer. What's more, given the contributions of Walter Trout, Coco Montoya, and the rhythm section (Bobby Haynes, bass; Paul Hines, drums), this is certainly an enjoyable concert disc. Fans will want it, no question. People who may be unfamiliar with Mayall will be glad to hear Trout and Montoya in their formative years. But if you've disliked John Mayall in the past, you probably won't become a convert on the basis of this disc.

The disc is considerably shorter than the length stated on the case. Extras include text bios and discographies of the principal players. American distribution is by MVD Visual.

Posted by Tom Bingham at [12:49 PM](#) 

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