

Mixed Mead-ear

John Mayall and the Bluesbreakers “Bare Wires” (London)

anon.

1968

John Mayall is an incredible musician—insomuch that not only is he a formidably versatile and adept instrumentalist, but he possesses a respect for his music which is unswerving.

Famous as he is for changing his personnel for each album, the Bluesbreakers belong to Mayall. That is why there will always be a John Mayall band. Strange though it may seem I can compare him to Frank Zappa, in that both are people with an awful lot to say but they cannot say it alone. Both tried (“Lumpy Gravy” and “Blues Alone”) and both attempts were good but neither really served its purpose. Both Zappa and Mayall are band leaders. Please bear that in mind as you read this review and/or hear the album.

Something of a change for Mayall is to include violin, Hawaiian guitar and harmonium. I am not going to review note by note, but just pick out separate pieces where Mayall and his band have said something.

“Where Did I Belong” is the first time Mayall has used violin on a record. As can be expected, the violin is only allowed to play blues, and the blues is played very well by one Henry Lowther—a stranger to me but I’m sure Mayall knows him well. Mick Taylor, the lead guitarist, will someday be a great blues guitarist. Since the making of this album he has left Mayall and formed his own band. Although seemingly obsessed by effects created electronically, I still like the solos he submits as small parts of himself.

Love the Bacharach/David style piano on “Open a New Door.”

“Fire” is...well, actually it is a blues version of “Crucifixion” by Phil Ochs. Incredibly unarranged backing track. Jon Hiseman, who plays drums on this album played for some time with the Graham Bond Organization.

For those of you who have not heard of Graham Bond, this means that Hiseman is one of the finest drummers in the business. And he is. Somebody called Baker used to play with Graham Bond. Now do you remember?

“I Know Now” is what “Broken Wings” (from the “Blues Alone” album) tried to “be.”

Wah-Wah’s are getting in everywhere, aren’t they? Here they are on “No Reply”—not quite blues in the accepted vein but near enough to have the Mayall name on it.

Although Taylor will one day be a fine guitarist, I don’t believe he is yet ready to attempt a full track solo as he has on side two (“Hartley Quits”).

“Killing Time” is yet another highlight of the album in that it demonstrates Mayall’s main talent—organizing a band. Each note of the song is planned, yet comes straight “from the soul,” particularly some of the small saxophone riffs in the middle. One of the strange things about an arrangement by this man is that while a solo is being performed, there is usually incredible things happening behind on the other instruments (note well the piano on “Killing Time”).

“Sandy” is the last, and I think the best, cut of side two. I would just like to make a final note that John Mayall wrote, with the exception of Taylor’s instrumental, the words, music, and arrangements for this album. Writing good original blues is not easy, and neither is playing it.

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