

The Fifth Estate Interviews

Mayall

Mike Kerman
Bob Fleck

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John Mayall is one of the most respected white musicians playing the blues today. While the blues are popular and being utilized by many pop musicians who are good copyists and technically proficient, there are few original or innovative performers.

Mayall, who has been playing the blues since 1963, has released seven albums. He is serious about the music and is no longer interested in performing good imitations of black bluesmen. Instead, he has developed a personal and unique style.

Besides developing his own blues mode, Mayall is concerned about the lack of interest in the great original black bluesmen still performing.

He will be starting his own label to produce and make available the wealth of talent that is going under-noticed.

As Mayall sees himself as a perpetrator of serious and original blues, the label will be called Crusade.

Mayall recently appeared at the Grande Ballroom in Detroit and agreed to a Fifth Estate interview.

Fifth Estate: How's it been at the Grande?

John Mayall: Oh, monstrous.

Fifth Estate: Do you remember the first time you were in Detroit two years ago on a Tuesday?

John Mayall: That was a good night, that had it. It was a special thing, a great thing that happened there. It wasn't a very good night musically but it was a success for what it was. That's never happened at the Grande since. Now its just the regular big pile-up of people out for the weekend. They go there every weekend and roll on the floor and take pills and smoke. It's a pretty sickening environment to try to play real music in, when people are stoned out of their minds. What are they really going to hear? Could you see a classical audience like that?

In this situation, there's going to be nothing special. By some freak accident, something good might happen that you might not be aware of. There might be some pretty good solos that come out of it. If its not happening to you it may be happening on the other side of the stage. Maybe Mick's (Taylor) having a good solo, something you can't hear objectively.

If you're stuck like this (at the Grande), all you can do is be honest about it and just play as best you can and try to do something. The genuine people, they will understand, they'll appreciate it, though they'll probably be in the minority.

Concert halls are pretty good, actually, for the stuff I'm playing now. Its a quieter band with a quieter approach to the music, and that's what I'd like it to be. Also, it works very well with a small club with a small audience. There's not as many problems with an English audience cause there's a smaller percentage of stoned people.

Fifth Estate: What other kinds of problems do you have with an audience?

John Mayall: The problem is their ignorance. Like, right here in Detroit, you got Eddy Kirkland (Detroit bluesman) pushing a wheelbarrow of cement. That's the problem with audiences. What do they really know about listening to the blues? They'd like to know, but they go in for the wrong things.

Fifth Estate: Do you get closer to the blues playing on the road?

John Mayall: Only if it's a good night, playing-wise. Then it's really worthwhile, great. But then you find yourself in trouble for one reason or another, then- it's really bad because you know that you're not saying what you mean to say, and it's wrong. Playing on the road is just like a practice or a jam session, to see what new things you can do. It's just "play" for the fun and enjoyment of playing, creating music without being organized or decided upon beforehand. It's all spontaneous.

Fifth Estate: Do you find any difference in audiences in different cities?

John Mayall: It's something you wouldn't know in advance. It really depends on that freak thing, whether or not you do communicate with the audience, which would automatically make you play better and make the audience better, and make everything fine. It's really not something you'd know in advance.

Fifth Estate: Does an audience try to mold the group to what they think they should be?

John Mayall: Yeah. They start from the beginning thinking in terms of groups. Audiences have fixed ideas about what makes the music.

Fifth Estate: What affect does an audience have on a band getting together? Can you play with a bad audience?

John Mayall: No, you can't really, not unless there's good acoustics, and you've got a good sound between you. Then you can make of it a great gig because the audience wouldn't come in to it. But if the acoustics aren't good and you do have things that keep you from playing your creative peak, and you're playing for an audience that understands that what they're about to hear is not a contrived thing, they would recognize that bits fail and you'd all have a laugh about it.

Fifth Estate: Do you ever do any jamming with other artists?

John Mayall: No, my jamming is just the gigs. I usually don't jam with other people because there's not many people around who can play. They may sound good in their own rehearsed outfit, but there are very few musicians who are good musicians.

Fifth Estate: What individual musicians do you like to play with?

John Mayall: Almost any Negro blues artist playing in the modern idiom, probably because I would respect them as performers, and we'd have a rapport with the audience. It would probably be a very small audience, but a good one in a small Negro club. If you know anything about music; you'd know which musicians are good to play with, like Eric Clapton and Peter Green (of Fleetwood Mac), people who are great performers, real musicians.

Fifth Estate: Do you know what Eric Clapton is doing?

John Mayall: He's not doing anything; he's resting after the ordeal. I'm rather surprised that he came through it untouched. Now that he's out of Cream, he's just the way he used to be. He's not messed up mentally or physically. The Cream was a big machine.

Fifth Estate: What do you think of all the groups that are breaking up now?

John Mayall: There shouldn't be any great fuss. It shouldn't be connected with this new group image thing. They were never groups to start with, they were individuals, but the world classified them as groups. They're not married to each other.

Fifth Estate: Is there any particular reason you stopped using horns in your band?

John Mayall: Yes. I had a big jazz band there. If I could draw a parallel, like on the bill you have John Lee Hooker, with him he's got Elvin Jones and Freddy Hubbard on trumpet...just build yourself a bill all-star band, a band of excellent soloists. How are you going to be able to hear John Lee Hooker if everyone's going to justify their being there?

Fifth Estate: What do you think of the early blues men who are still playing today?

John Mayall: They had Bukka White, Son House and Skip James on a tour in a Folk-Blues Festival in England. Son House was the big success out of the three of them. To me he was the most decrepit, and looked the oldest. It was a bit pathetic. But musically, Skip James was really fantastic, but he wasn't as obviously impressive. People just don't go for the music directly, they go for other things.

Fifth Estate: When you're traveling, do you have time to go hear blues?

John Mayall: Depends on what's happening. Sometimes I've gone and played with people like Otis Rush after the gig. Its good to play some music with a proper audience, and not the monsters.

Fifth Estate: What do you think when black blues artists are playing with small, seemingly shoddy amplifiers, and kids from the suburbs have all these amplifiers that they have nowhere to play.

John Mayall: They don't need more than that. That's the whole point see? People like Freddy King wouldn't play on an amplifier that he didn't like. If he's got a small one that's what it should be. A small amp with a good tone for playing quietly so that you can hear it, you know. That's what it should be.

Volume isn't really necessary, for a true appreciation of blues. It should be the music you listen to, not a lot of volume. That's what the blues is supposed to be; like conversation, its a form of communicating.

Fifth Estate: Are you thinking of doing any producing?

John Mayall: Yes, I'm getting my own record label and Eddy Kirkland is just the type of guy who would have a contract. He should have; he's really fantastic.

Fifth Estate: What about the black community and blues?

John Mayall: For all this professed interest about the resurgence of the blues in this country, if you were to ask a Negro about it on his side of town, they probably wouldn't be aware of it. Like, I asked Magic Sam (black bluesman). he was raving about the solo on the Blues Breakers album, with Eric playing guitar. He was saying it was fantastic guitar, is he still with you? What's he doing now? He didn't know that Eric joined Cream; he'd never heard of the Cream. That's the way it is, they haven't heard the white blues bands, cause there's nothing there to listen to, for the most part it's a lot of bullshit.

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