

JOHN MAYALL



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1964-2022</i>	<i>Classic rhythm'n'Blues / Blues-rock</i>	<i>Crawling up A Hill (1964)</i>

Only Solitaire

Artist: *John Mayall*

Years: *1964-1965*

George Starostin's Reviews

Page contents:

- [Plays John Mayall](#) (1965)



PLAYS JOHN MAYALL

Album released:

March 26, 1965

V A L U E

3 3 3 3 3

More info:



Tracks: 1) Crawling Up A Hill; 2) I Wanna Teach You Everything; 3) When I'm Gone; 4) I Need Your Love; 5) The Hoot Owl; 6) R&B Time (Night Train / Lucille); 7) Crocodile Walk; 8) What's The Matter With You; 9) Doreen; 10) Runaway; 11) Heartache; 12) Chicago Line; 13*) Crawling Up A Hill; 14*) Mr. James; 15*) Crocodile Walk; 16*) Blues City Shakedown; 17*) My Baby Is Sweeter.

REVIEW

For most people in the world — and far be it from me to blame them — the name «John Mayall» begins and ends with the **Bluesbreakers** album from 1966, though many of the same people might probably have a vague idea that «John Mayall» was more than a one-time sideman for Eric Clapton, and that he *probably* played the blues somewhere out there before 1966 and most likely continued to play the blues after 1966. Let us, therefore, begin from the beginning and focus our attention on the «before 1966» thing — because, in fact, **Bluesbreakers With Eric Clapton** was only the *second* LP to come out under the name of John Mayall, while the first single to come out under the name of John Mayall was actually released in 1964, around the same time Eric cut his first records with the Yardbirds.



If there was *one* large problem with being John Mayall in 1964-65, then it was the exact same one as with Alexis Korner, of Blues Incorporated. Both were decent and sincere musicians, passionate about promoting and developing blues and blues-rock in the UK — but both were simply too *old*: Korner was born in 1928, and Mayall in 1933, which makes them at least a decade or so (in Korner's case, a decade and a half) older than the average Beatle or Rolling Stone — and back in the early

Sixties, this mattered, *a lot*, and not just because of the agist bias of the younger generations. What this meant was that Korner and Mayall cut their playing teeth in the Fifties, an age of relative restraint and repression, when «wildness» was not yet fully accepted as a normal state for performing popular music. Rock'n'roll artists could be «wild», perhaps, but neither Korner nor Mayall were big fans of pure rock'n'roll: they liked old-fashioned jazz, Delta and Chicago blues, a little bit of soul (more Ray Charles than James Brown) — basically, any type of music that one could be expected to sit down and listen to, rather than dance one's ass off (though a little bit of dancing every now and then couldn't hurt). And although both Korner and Mayall were more than sympathetic toward those rough and rowdy kids — in fact, almost fatherly — it is almost as if they found it somewhat undignified and unbecoming to try and challenge them on their own terms: Alexis Korner never became Mick Jagger, and John Mayall never became Eric Clapton or Peter Green.

Ironically, it was not until the rough and rowdy kids became stars that their «fathers» actually got themselves some record contracts. Well, okay, so Korner (being the eldest one, after all) did begin releasing albums as early as 1962, but Mayall had to spend eight years to land himself a recording contract (although I'm not sure he actually bothered — it's more likely that the record industry eventually found him than his ever being in a hurry to find the record industry). Whatever be the case, Mayall's first single with the Bluesbreakers was released in May 1964 and consisted of two original compositions, featuring Mr. Mayall himself on vocals and organ, Bernie Watson on guitar, Martin Hart on drums, and a 19-year old youngling called John McVie on bass. Yes, that's exactly right: boot up '[Crawling Up A Hill](#)' and what you hear are the first ever known bass notes to be played by the future bass king of Fleetwood Mac.

The song, whose original studio version is included as a bonus track on some editions of the album, is actually a damn fine piece of British rhythm'n'blues from 1964 — though its most outstanding feature are probably the lyrics, which are both semi-autobiographical ("I'll quit my job without a shadow of doubt / To sing the blues that I know about") *and* also clearly influenced by the likes of Chuck Berry's 'Too Much Monkey Business' and 'Johnny B. Goode' ("working for a rich man, staying just a poor man, never stop to wonder why"). It might, in fact, be the first semi-autobiographical song in the history of British rock music altogether — considering that most of the pop and rhythm'n'blues bands at the time were generally content to either sing about boy-girl themes or faithfully cover whatever words they could capture from across the Atlantic. (Apparently, some of its impact still persisted even forty years later, since the song was even [revived by Katie Melua](#) for her debut album — being the Georgian-born girl she was, she could certainly connect to the "so here I am in London town / a better scene I'm gonna be around" bit in a meaningful way).

The melodic aspects of the song are slightly more problematic, and it is a problem — or, at least, a peculiarity, since many people might not find this a problem at all — of just about every «original» song in Mayall's early repertoire. On one hand, it is indeed quite impressive that, where so many of his contemporaries simply covered American material, Mayall was so adamant — so early on — about writing and recording his own songs: almost everything on the early singles as well as this LP is credited to Mayall himself (a stupidly misguided Wikipedia article will try to tell you that 'When I'm Gone' is the Smokey Robinson hit for Brenda Holloway and Mary Wells, but do we really want to believe that John Mayall would cover a Motown song in 1965? Not on your life!). But on the other hand, just about each and every one of these songs is a «steal» — melodically based on something from the blues, soul, and rock'n'roll repertoire and only adding a few tiny twists and tweaks so as to avoid copyright issues, which places us in the uneasy position of trying to delve deep into the man's mind and guess whether all of this was being done as a loving tribute or as a tricky strategy to make just a little more money on other people's achievements. I'd probably guess it was a little bit of both.

'Crawling Up A Hill' at least fares relatively nicely in this department, though you shall almost certainly recognize its verse melody as a slightly sped-up and tonally transposed take on Ray Charles' 'Hallelujah I Love Her So' ("every morning 'bout half past eight" = "every morning 'fore the sun comes up", etc.); but with the unusual twin attack of harmonica and Mayall's Vox Continental organ from the opening bars of the song, this circumstance is barely noticeable and forgivable — also, the descending "minute after minute, second after second" bridge, introducing a completely different melodic pattern, seems to be fairly original to me. But the B-side of the single, 'Mr. James', is nothing but a generic lyrical rewrite of Elmore James' 'It Hurts Me Too' — and the fact that Mayall supposedly wrote this explicitly as a tribute to the recently deceased blues hero ("oh dear Mr. James, oh tell me why you had to go?") does not entirely justify the fact that he could have at least co-credited "dear Mr. James" for the recording.

From then on, listening to John Mayall essentially becomes a game of «guess that melody» — and although my knowledge of pre-British Invasion era blues and soul music is considerably larger today than it used to be in my childhood era of musical starvation, I am still not sure that I am able to pick up on everything. I *am* kinda proud, though, that even before taking a listen to John's second single, entitled 'Crocodile Walk' (yes, that's 'Crocodile *Walk*', not 'Crocodile *Rock*', Elton John got nothing on this, baby!), I was suspicious that it might have something in common with 'See You Later Alligator' — and sure enough, for most of the duration of the verse it is the exact same song! only slowed down rather than sped up this time, and the last bars of the verse take us in a slightly different direction from Bill Haley's. Still got a good swaggy groove, though, and a pretty nifty guitar solo to boot — somewhat reminding me of John Fogerty's classic style from several years

later (think 'Working Man', etc.; the similarities in specific licks are even more pronounced on the live version). And it definitely has more of a blues feel to it than Bill Haley's rockabilly ditty.

That guitar solo was *not* played by Bernie Watson, though. The single was released in early April of 1965, a few weeks after Mayall's first LP, which was itself (following an example already established by Alexis Korner's Blues Incorporated in 1962) recorded live on December 7, 1964 at a club called «Klook's Kleek» in the West Hampstead area of London which, not too coincidentally, was located just a few clicks (sorry) away from Decca's recording studio (I guess this might have something to do with the phenomenal — for 1964 — sound quality of the live recording). By that time, the lineup of the Bluesbreakers had already undergone some important changes: Watson was replaced by one Roger Dean (nothing whatsoever to do with the guy who painted all those Yes album covers), and Martin Hart was replaced on drums by Hughie Flint — thus almost completing the classic Bluesbreakers lineup, with the sole exception of that clean-cut «Beano» fellow. (On the live album, they are also joined by Nigel Stanger on saxophone, though I don't think he was a salaried member of the band).

Although all the other three members of the Bluesbreakers were younger than Mayall by around 8–10 years (a distance that would become ever larger with the subsequent incarnations of the band), they mesh together fairly well, and it could hardly be said that Mayall is «holding back» his bandmates or anything — more likely, he just tended to choose those who suited his own musical temperament: tight, professional, energetic, but at the same time restrained and free from the «primal» excesses of young rhythm'n'blues-ish whippersnappers. In particular, the McVie / Flint rhythm section is thick, flexible, and always reliable; the bass is quite prominent in the remastered CD version and will be met with unquestionable love from all fans of Fleetwood Mac-era John McVie.

Meanwhile, Roger Dean is pretty damn good with his instrument — he certainly does not have Clapton's classic guitar tones and smooth technique, but on some of these tracks he already rocks harder and heavier than any electric bluesman from Chicago: check out, for instance, the solo on 'I Need Your Love', where he begins with a series of licks that integrate the soulfulness of Otis Rush with the jerkiness of Chuck Berry, then gradually builds up to a torrent of up-the-scale trills which, in the pre-Clapton era, could almost be considered «virtuosic». In an era when the idea of a blues guitar hero had yet to materialize in the UK, this had got to count for something at least.

This leaves us with Mayall himself, and Mayall is Mayall — solidly middle-of-the-road about everything he does, from singing (nice high-pitched voice, but with little range or versatility) to playing (good organ technique, but not that much subtlety or invention) to blowing (technically, he might have been one of the best harp practitioners in England at the time,

but I'd still take Mick Jagger for the ability to brew atmosphere over Mayall's hat-tipping to Little Walter). The only thing he is truly *awful* at is stage announcing which he, like Korner, does in the same annoyingly «mock-academic» tone, not to mention occasionally trying to come across as way more hip than he actually is ("this one is called 'I Need Your Love', and is dedicated to all the fine young chicks that are out front" — uh, so exactly with how many of these «fine young chicks» did you «sow your wild oats» after the show, Mr. Mayall?).

And then, of course, there's that weird «semi-songwriting» all over the place: 'I Wanna Teach You Everything' is 'Sweet Home Chicago' ("come on, come on, let's go..."), 'I Need Your Love' is something by Muddy Waters (not quite 'Hoochie Coochie Man', but close enough), 'What's The Matter With You' is 'Green Onions' with lyrics, 'Doreen' is John Lee Hooker's 'Louise', and 'Runaway' is a variation on Memphis Slim's 'Steppin' Out', which would soon, of course, be recorded under its proper title with Eric on the studio album. I also suspect that the organ riff of 'Heartache' was taken from Rosco Gordon's 'Just A Little Bit' (= 'Don't Want Much' as performed by the Animals), though a review on RYM also rightfully remarked that the song itself eerily predates Shocking Blue's 'Venus' (which, on the other hand, as we all know, was ripped off from 'The Banjo Song' by The Big 3, so I'm *really* getting lost in here).

The one song on which Mayall really jumps up to the sky in search of originality is 'The Hoot Owl', with lyrics about... a hoot owl, supposedly because this is exactly what John was reminded of when experimenting with the electronically tampered sound of the Cembale electric piano, which he occasionally plays on the album. Of course, the tune itself is a joke song, something with the aesthetics (if not the actual sound) of somebody like the Coasters, but at least it shows that Mayall's creativity occasionally amounted to something other than renaming 'Louise' into 'Doreen' or changing alligators for crocodiles. On the other hand, heck, *everybody* steals, as John subtly points out to all of us by merging 'Night Train' and 'Lucille' quite seamlessly into a single track — and this time, actually indicating the original credits. Fuck it.

Finally, the closing number, 'Chicago Line', raises the excitement up a notch, with its noisy and aggressive enhancement of the Bo Diddley beat that puts it somewhere in between Bo Diddley proper and future Who-style jamming on 'Magic Bus', with the added pleasure of a «dialog» between Dean's guitar and Mayall's harp and Cembale, suspenseful and funny at times: definitely an above-average finish to an overall intriguing, if not always exciting, experience.

On the whole, it's just a damn good record, the quintessential spectacularly unspectacular album from a hard-working non-genius with excellent taste and solid craft. Sound-wise, it blows *any* live album of UK rhythm'n'blues preceding it — Blues Incorporated, Alex Harvey, even **Five Live Yardbirds** — out of the water. John McVie and Roger Dean provide almost-

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first-rate bottom and top layers. And, in some ways, I'm glad that Mayall «mutated» all those songs, because he managed to keep me more entertained that way, on my «now where have I heard *that* one before?» toes from start to finish. If it were all just John Lee Hooker and Booker T covers, this review would have been much shorter, that one's for sure.

