

Even into his eighties, John is still performing — here he is at the 2016 King Biscuit Blues Festival
Photo by © Marilyn Stringer

Living Legend: JOHN MAYALL

The Godfather of British Blues

By Mike Shivers

John Mayall told the audience at his Blues Hall of Fame induction ceremony in May 2016 that he would continue to perform and make music as long as he was able to do it with full energy and enthusiasm... that it was all he knew how to do, then wryly added, "you'll soon be sick of me, I'm sure." As his career continues strong over fifty years since its start, his fans beg to differ. To really get the true idea of who John Mayall is, go no further than his last three studio albums — *A Special Life*, *Find A Way To Care* and his most recent 2017 release, *Talk About That* — three of his most reflective and personal albums to date. Many of the tracks on all three show John's reflective mood over his career and life, but also look forward with a continued desire to explore the blues and create new music.

John Mayall was born November 29, 1933, near Manchester, England. His early introduction and influence in music began at home. His father, Murray Mayall, was an accomplished guitarist and had an extensive collection of 78rpm records of mostly jazz and American blues. Record collections were the primary way fledgling British musicians of the '50s and '60s were exposed to American music — and the blues in particular — as the British airwaves had restrictive mainstream playlists. The first blues record John recalls hearing was by the Mills Brothers, not generally known for the blues, and that record led John to listen to Lonnie Johnson... and the rest is history. When John was introduced to boogie woogie

piano in his early teens, the mold was cast. As a teen, John attended junior art school in Manchester, and began to learn piano. It was a lonely existence for John at first, as there was little interest locally in the type of music he chose to play.

In the early '50s, John worked in display advertising, served in the army for two years, and afterwards continued his studies at the Regional College of Art — during which he became a more proficient musician and taught music to local youth. Upon graduating in 1959, John worked in advertising until 1963, when he turned to music full time.

John Mayall started his first band in 1962 in Manchester — the Blues Syndicate — which included John on keyboards, guitar, harmonica and vocals; Hughie Flint on drums; Ray Cummings (who had played in John's art school band, The Powerhouse Four) on guitar; Jack Masarak on alto sax; and John Rowlands on trumpet. The Blues Syndicate was inspired by Alexis Korner's Blues Incorporated, and it was Korner who convinced John he could make a living playing R&B and the blues if he went to London.

"When John plays the blues, it is an expression of everything he has experienced and everyone he has been inspired by, in a quest to put out the most expressive, unique and spontaneous statement possible."

— Dr. Marie Trout, John's induction ceremony into the Blues Hall of Fame



Each of John's shows is an original, not to be repeated Photo by Mike Shivers

The first incarnation of the Bluesbreakers came in January 1963, and they signed their first recording contract in early 1964 with Decca, releasing the single "Crawling Up A Hill" a year later. The Bluesbreaker lineup from April 1964 to April 1965 was Mayall, John McVie, Hughie Flint and Roger Dean on guitar – who was replaced by Eric Clapton in April 1965, after departing from a two-year stint playing with the Yardbirds. In July 1966 – just as Clapton was leaving the Bluesbreakers to form Cream – the Bluesbreakers released an album which was to become a landmark release, not only in John Mayall's career, but in the electric blues genre: *The Blues Breakers – John Mayall with Eric Clapton*. This album, released on Decca, rose to #6 in the U.K. album charts. It contains blues standards such as "Parchman Farm" and "All Your Love," and is affectionately referred to by John as the "Beano album" because of the newspaper title that can be seen being read by Clapton on the front cover. Many of the tracks from this classic album continue to be part of John's live shows today. In these early days of his career, John also backed blues greats touring in England such as John Lee Hooker, T-Bone Walker, Eddie Boyd and Sonny Boy Williamson.

Between January 1963 and the summer of 1970, the Bluesbreakers went through no less than 15 personnel changes. Many who played with John went on to become successful stars, aided by his support and leadership, including John McVie, Mick Fleetwood, Mick Taylor, Andy Fraser, Coco Montoya and Walter Trout.

The album *The Turning Point* was released in 1969 before John made his permanent move from England to California in 1970. It includes the track "Room to Move," which is arguably John's most

John affectionately refers to this album as the "Beano album."



recognized song and received extensive crossover airplay on rock radio. The 1970s were a time when John experimented more with jazz, blues and rock innovations. The structure of the Bluesbreakers was left in England, and John went to a more free-form style of band collaboration for both touring and recording. Notable band members during this time included Canned Heat's guitarist Harvey Mandel and bassist Larry Taylor.

In 1982, John reformed the more classic Bluesbreakers lineup: himself, Mick Taylor, Colin Allen and John McVie. He took a brief hiatus in late 1983, playing solo with a revised version of Canned Heat. Through the '80s and '90s, the Bluesbreakers had a powerful lineup; notable members during this time included guitarists Walter Trout, Coco Montoya and Buddy Whittington, bassist Bobby Haynes and drummer Joe Yule. Not always using the Bluesbreakers name, a number of his classic albums released during this time include *Chicago Line*, *A Sense of Place* and *Wake Up Call*. In 2008, John decided to permanently retire the band and the name. After a short break from the road, John formed a new band featuring guitarist Rocky Athas, bassist Greg Rzab and drummer Jay

John Mayall on the Road

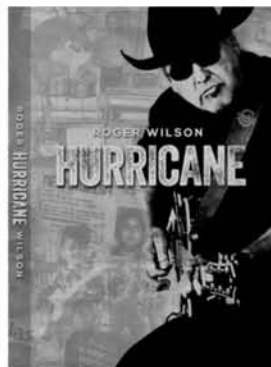
As an avid blues fan and freelance videographer providing video services for blues performers, I've had the opportunity to go on the road with John a bit and gain some insight to the "Godfather of British Blues."

You might not expect it from a man we revere as a living legend, but without exception at each show, John will set up and man the merch table himself. When the main door opens, he talks with everyone who takes the time to say "hello," poses for photos and signs autographs – he's good with it all. Nowadays, many artists treat the "meet and greet" as an add-on to the ticket price. Not John. He genuinely appreciates the people who come to see him and the band, and goes that extra step every time.

If you've been fortunate enough to have seen John perform multiple times, you will know that the same show is never repeated from one night to the next. John has such a deep catalog of music to pull from that he meticulously plans his shows. Like most bands, he writes a set list for the show, which sits on top of his keyboard. Early on in my time with the band, I asked his road manager if I might be able to have the list after the show, as it is common practice for bands to give these away. But no – I was told that John keeps every set list and puts them in a book, chronicling each of his shows. I don't know the count, but he probably has thousands of these set lists saved to hand down to his children and grandchildren – preserving a small piece of his legacy as a pioneer of the blues.

- Mike

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Davenport. This lineup recorded John's four most recent albums and, with the departure of Athas in late 2016, continues as a touring trio, with John picking up guitar duties.

The first of two major honors recognizing the career and achievements of John Mayall came in 2005, when he received the prestigious Order of the British Empire (OBE) on the Queens Honor List; the second in May 2016, when John was inducted into the Blues Hall of Fame. At John's induction ceremony, Dr. Marie Trout, author and wife of Walter Trout, said, "When John plays the blues, it is an expression of everything he has experienced and everyone he has been inspired by, in a quest to put out the most expressive, unique and spontaneous statement possible." Dr. Trout could not have been more spot on. John Mayall is the consummate professional inspiring the best in those he works and performs with. I've been privileged to work with John and his band for the past three years and am continuously impressed by the mutual respect that exists within this band, and really, as Dr. Trout says, everyone who comes into the orbit of planet Mayall.

For the liner notes of the Bluesbreakers album *Crusade* released in 1967, John wrote, "I have dedicated my life to the blues... I hope you'll join forces with me." Fifty years later, John Mayall still carries the banner for the blues, and fortunately for us all, many, many more have joined forces with him, keeping the blues alive and thriving. 🎵

Mike Shivers, a lifelong fan of the genre, hosted blues radio shows during the '80s and '90s. Based in Florida, he is a freelance videographer and founder of the fledgling Rock & Blues Digital Archive. Mike produces and provides video service for blues performers, providing professional quality video for the artist's use, at no cost to the artist. He says, "It's my way of preserving the music and giving back to those that have given us so much over the years."

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John's career, spanning almost 60 years, has earned him the title of "Godfather of the British Blues." Photo by Mike Shivers