

Mayall: No longer the "Bluesbreaker"

Story by Norm Frizzel
Photos by C.R. Wilson

The following interview with John Mayall took place backstage at the Kinsmen Fieldhouse immediately after his performance there last Sunday. Mayall was very tired, not only from the concert but also from the long bus ride from Lethbridge the night before. Still, I found John to be a very open and easy person to interview.

Norm Frizzel: How long has the present band been together?

John Mayall: It's been on the road now since February, the beginning of February this year. So I guess this is the ninth or tenth week. Somethin' like that.

NF: Have you recorded an album with the new group?

JM: Yes, it's been out, I think, for about 3 or 4 weeks now. Haven't got it here?

NF: "The Latest Edition" is the latest one I've seen.

JM: No, no. With this band it's on ABC-Bluethumb. It's called "New Year, New Band, New Company". So that's a change of label, a change of band, whole new material. Most of what we played tonight was represented on the new album. So if you dug it tonight, you'll be getting it on the album.

NF: How did you happen to get Sugarcane (Don Harris) back in the group?

JM: Well, you know, he was just there at the right time. He wanted to be in the band and it coincided with me putting the new thing together.

He wants to be known as Don Harris, he's dropped the "Sugarcane." So if you're in charge of writing you could make that little comment there. It took me about 4 years to live down the title of "Bluesbreakers". It takes a long time. Anyways, that's his wishes.

NF: Where are you living now?

JM: Still in Laurel Canyon, Los Angeles, Hollywood.

NF: Have you made any tours of Britain recently?

JM: No, I haven't been there for about 2 years now and then I wasn't working. I just went back for a couple of weeks at Christmas time. There's not a great deal of work in Europe right now. In fact, there's a definite decrease of work in the States too. It's due to the recession, in general all over the world.



NF: Yes, there's been a definite decrease in concert attendance.

JM: Of course, the big super-groups will obviously still pack them in, but I think now, with the fact that people have got less money to spend on entertainment or anything, rather than, like in the old days, they'd maybe go to three or four concerts a week if they were there, but now they can only afford to go to one. Audiences are having to be much more choosy to comply with their pockets. It's something that's hitting the whole world right now, so where it will end, I really don't know.

NF: Do you think it's harder now, with the audiences being more choosy, for the newer groups coming along to start up?

JM: I would say yes, very very difficult for new groups. It really is, for sure. It seems now, the only way a new group can get off the ground or get work at all, is to have a hit record of some kind that would do it, launch them. Then it would be up to them to back it up on a live thing. Some groups are able to do it that way and then not come up with the same quality when they go on stage. Some groups are better on stage and never make a hit record. It's really weird. It's a freaky business.

NF: Do you ever have plans of releasing singles?

JM: Everytime an album comes out. I've got 23 albums and more singles than that have been taken from them.

NF: They really haven't established you as a singles artist, though.

JM: No, I don't make singles as such. I try and make an album of songs that would all qualify for singles. In other words, they could be five minutes long, but if there was some commercial potential there, that the company could hear in the album version then they would shorten it, because that helps the sales of the album. When I'm at the stage of trying to do an album, they always lift a single. They like to wait a few weeks to see what the stations tend to pick from the album, what everybody seems to go for the most, and put it out as a single. Then you get some airplay... or you attempt to.

NF: I imagine now, being established, there isn't too much interference from record company people. I was wondering, in the earlier days when you were starting on your recording career, whether they suggested to you certain things that would make it more commercial, more saleable.

JM: No, fortunately I'm one of the few cases that it never happened to me that way. My first contract was with English Decca, which was released as London Records. My first dealings with Decca was with an album called "John Mayall Plays John Mayall". In one year, I think it sold about 900 copies, that's all. So, it was a dismal failure. They crossed me off the books. Then I went back to them later with the Eric Clapton thing and, at that time, we were doing pretty good in the clubs. That record did it. They never understood why because it was completely against the grain. So, they never

interfered with it. All they knew was that my records sold steadily, not nothing gigantic like, they didn't even bother listening to them, just put them out. "I don't know they stand up in sales, he's got the following now, they'll buy anything he does." They never interfered. That's the way it's been for me all along.

NF: Did you switch to Blue Thumb because you thought maybe the people would be more interested in your music rather than straight dollars and cents?

JM: No, Blue Thumb has now been bought up by ABC. ABC has the Bluesway label and Dunhill. So the Crusaders are on it, the Pointer Sisters, Rufus, I believe are going to be on that. So it's just like an extension of their things. It came about because my Polydor five years was up. When the time that happens, you negotiate for a new deal and whoever comes up with the best offer in the way of distribution, or facilities, getting behind something, also a managerial thing... you go for the best deals. I hope to have a good few years with Blue Thumb.

NF: Are you working mainly out of Los Angeles, like for rehearsals or recording?

JM: Well, we don't really rehearse. We rehearsed before we went on the road in January, we had about 3 days. We don't really have time for that and I'm not really into rehearsing, anyway. Most of my gigs are very much improvising around the structures of the material that we know. Each night I try and throw in a few, total improvisations.

I don't usually rehearse any band that I have. We all live in LA, with the exception of Jay the pianist, he lives in Nashville. Dee was from Memphis, but she moved out with us to start the new band. Everybody else is there, of course, so it's convenient. If we want to get together, we just phone each other up.

NF: In between groups or albums, like with each album you seem to come out with a slight change in sound, are you sitting around between bands and thinking of some sort of new music, just playing around at home?

JM: I never play at home. I never practice. I never do any of those things that people think that I do. A lot of musicians do practice everyday and stuff like that even when they aren't working or even when they're working but I never do it. When I finish a tour, I don't think about music in a conscious sense. When it comes time to make an album, then I'll just think about what I have to do right there at the time, because then it will be my kind of thing going.

NF: Do you think of people that would fit into that sort of music?

JM: Yes. Well, I think in this particular case, this band will run into another season. I'd like to take it to Europe this year if I can get any gigs lined up towards the end of the year. Like I've said, we'll record another album with this line-up. We're having a really good time and everybody works very well together in this band, more than what eventually happens.