

Record Reviews

John Mayall's Bluesbreakers
Chicago Line
Island

Willie Dixon
Hidden Charms
Capitol

by Mike Spindloe

The blues are alive and well if these two releases from two of the genre's top names are any indication. After 25 years of recording, John Mayall is an avatar of white blues, while Willie Dixon was an avatar for the blues, period, way back when Mayall was learning his first guitar licks. Dixon influenced a generation of blues players and has now also outlived many of them.

Dixon's latest album, *Hidden Charms*, is a mix of new songs and oldies dating back to the '50s and '60s. It was produced by T-Bone Burnett, who should know how, and features instrumental contributions from an all-star lineup: Lafayette Leake, Red Callender, Earl Palmer, Cash McCall and Sugar Blue.

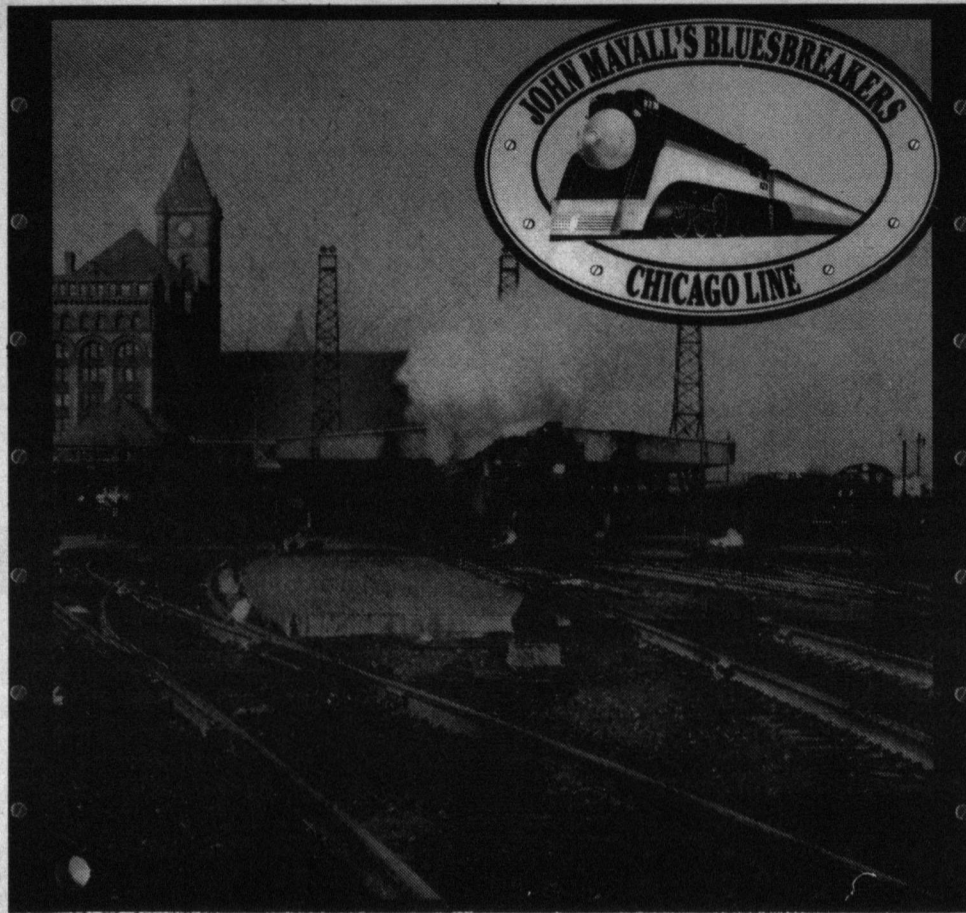
Like Mayall, Dixon spices up his blues with a variety of grooves, although he generally opts for more relaxed, shuffling tempos than does Mayall. "I Do the Job", a new song which closes the album, is a good example. It is a slow, steaming 12-bar blues which gradually builds to a scorching double chorus featuring guitar and harp.

The subtle qualities of much of *Hidden Charms* are also evidenced by this track. When McCall and Sugar Blue step out to solo, you realize that they, along with the rest of the band, have been seemingly effortlessly gelling as a unit. Individual licks jump forward momentarily but remain part of the overall groove; it is a fine piece of ensemble playing.

Among the other new songs, "Study War No More", co-written by Dixon and his grandson, stands out with its topical lyrics, while "I Don't Trust Myself" laments the singer's inability to trust anyone or anything. "Jungle Swing" uses a Bo Diddley-ish beat played on toms in a celebration of the universal appeal of rhythms.

Perhaps Dixon's real message is best summed up by "I Love the Life I Live", which dates from 1956: "May be broke, looking like a bum/ You bet your life I have had my fun/ If I look like I'm over the hill/ I've lived the life I love/ And I love the life I live."

Seeing the name "John Mayall's Bluesbreakers" on a record means only one thing: John Mayall will be on the album, singing and playing the blues on his guitar and harp. Who else will be along for the ride is anyone's guess, because the Blues-



breakers must be the most chameleon-like band in history; their membership changes faster than the average biographer can count, but the alumni list is impressive.

The song, however, remains much the same, despite Mayall's professed interest in change, which has manifested itself in experiments like *The Turning Point* in 1970, wherein he scrapped drums and lead guitar in favour of an acoustic-based sound.

Chicago Line is very much a band album, though, and as in the past, Mayall has picked players for their ability to create the sound he has in mind. In this case, the sound is full and crisp, with healthy backbeats driving an aggressive rhythm section and a multi-guitar attack further complemented by a variety of keyboard sounds.

It is the guitars which really dominate here, although it is difficult to tell who is wailing away at any particular moment without referring to the liner notes. It could be Coco Montoya, Walter Trout or Mayall, who all share lead duties although the bulk of the riffs go to the hired guns.

Most of *Chicago Line* is very upbeat, an eighties version of the blues that nonetheless rings with all the conviction and confidence of Mayall's long experience. The album slides in nicely beside the Robert Crays and Albert Collinses who represent the new generation of bluesmen, thus providing evidence that this is a genre where tradition is a living force rather than merely a

mantle to be cast off. Mayall is now in the enviable position of being part of both the tradition and the living force.

The Tail Gators
OK Let's Go!
Restless

by Kevin Law

Adequate, sufficient, typical. These are words that come to mind when listening to *OK Let's Go*, the second LP from a Texas trio

called the Tail Gators.

The last decade has seen a marked escalation in the popularity of roots music, and the country rock genre is no exception. The Tail Gators are another in a long line of bands that fit into this category, supposedly combining the basic ingredients of rock and roll with elements of traditional American music, ranging from Cajun and Zydeco to rhythm and blues.

The question, however, is do they serve up this amalgamation of style in a unique recipe of their own? Not really. The Tail Gators music has been called "swampabilly" or "swamp-rock," but the catchy labels in this case do not mean catchy, original melodies or lyrics. Instead, they play generic Texas good time music that can, without a doubt, ignite feet to blaze a hot trail across any live venue dance floor, but as extraordinary tunes on an album they are only satisfactory.

This is not to say The Tail Gators are bad. They are good at what they do, and a couple of songs on the album have enough of a hook to slightly raise them above the run of the mill, but variety is lack-here, and in the specific stylizations of the country rock category, expansion and a willingness to take chances is necessary to rise above the norm. Just ask Timbuk 3, a husband and wife team with a ghetto blaster that produces more originality of composition in their minimalist structures than a 4-piece bar band like the Georgia Satellites could ever dream of in their proven mediocrity.

There are probably dozens of same sounding bands grinding around the Texas bar circuit these days, and The Tail Gators are one of them.

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