



The British Blues Explosion

By the 1950's, the blues had lost its primary black audience to soul music, but had gained a new audience of young white kids. To the black audience, the themes of oppression, anger and rebellion were no longer relevant and reminded them uncomfortably of their past history as slaves. In Britain, the popular music scene was dominated by cosy, idealistic songs of romance and ballads from artists such as Ruby Murray, Tony Bennett and Rosemary Clooney. To the post World War Two teenagers, this was just plain boring. Young white country singers, such as Elvis Presley were recording blues for a new generation, and paving the way for Rock and Roll. Performance became equally as exciting as the music, and inspired by black R'n'B and electric blues stars such as T-Bone Walker and B.B. King. By the end of the 50's, the electric guitar would come to dominate the genre and the way songs were musically arranged. Loud guitars demanded a loud drummer as well.

Bill Haley a middle-aged, white former country and western singer noticed that white teens had picked up the street slang, dances and clothing style of the black youths. Haley, and his backing band The Comets decided to emphasise the heavy back beat in their music to appeal to the new hybrid fashion, and focus lyrics on themes that were relevant to a teenage audience. In April 1954, the band recorded raucous covers of Joe Turner's '*Shake, Rattle and Roll*' and a novelty song, '*Rock Around the Clock*'. The song was a smash hit both sides of the Atlantic, and became the theme song to '*The Blackboard Jungle*' a film about teenage rebellion. Although Haley was an unlikely icon, his contribution to music was to open the door to the white R'n'B artist, and to the success of Elvis Presley, Buddy Holly and ultimately bands including the Beatles, The Rolling Stones, Cream and Led Zeppelin. The first blues records were probably introduced to Britain from America by sea men after WW2. By the 60's, the Chicago blues was the most contemporary sound around, and the artists on the Chess records label had a huge influence on English players, and got a lot of air play on campus radio. The key blues clubs included the famous Marquee in Soho and the Crawdaddy in Richmond, where both the Rolling Stones and The Yardbirds had been the resident bands.

The Beatles were inspired by radio friendly mainstream acts such as Chuck Berry and Buddy Holly, but bands such as the Yardbirds and The Rolling Stones delved deeper into more obscure areas and found musical inspiration in such artists as Muddy Waters, John Lee Hooker, and Howlin' Wolf.

'The English Art College was a training ground for blues freaks. The amount of talent that came from one area in London was incredible'. – Jimmy Page – Led Zeppelin.

'Blues Breakers', released in 1966 was the most influential album of the British blues era. It featured a collaboration of white blues veteran John Mayall and former Yardbird Eric Clapton. Clapton played a fusion of the styles he had absorbed from listening to Chicago blues recordings, and fused it with a Gibson Les Paul amplified through a Marshall. After this one hit album, Clapton left to form his own band, Cream.

John Mayall's Bluesbreakers



John Mayall is considered to be the Godfather of British Blues. He was born on the 29th of November 1933 in Macclesfield, Cheshire. He was the eldest of three children brought up in a humble working class family living with the restrictions and rationing of World War 2. His father was a guitarist and introduced the young John to his extensive jazz and blues collection, of artists such as Lead Belly, Pinetop Smith and Eddie Lang. These influenced him for life. As a young teenager obsessed with music, John began to teach himself to play guitar, the next door neighbour's piano and a borrowed harmonica. Soon he developed his own style, and in an eccentrically artistic twist moved out of his parents house in favour of living in his back yard tree house. He was notorious for being a bit strange and was featured in the local newspapers.

His first band was formed in 1955 while he was still in art college, learning commercial graphic design. Calling themselves the Powerhouse Four, they worked locally until Mayall was enlisted for National Service, and was posted to Korea for

three years. On returning to England, he moved back into his tree house, this time accompanied by his first wife, Pamela.

He had a successful career as a graphic designer, but still maintained his musical interests which came to the surface again when he was in his early thirties. Between 1956 and 1962 John played gigs part time with a reformed Powerhouse Four, and later The Blues Syndicate. His debut album was released in 1965, a live album entitled 'John Mayall plays John Mayall', which was badly recorded but captured the energy and atmosphere of an R'n'B club. John was not considered to be a good singer or lyricist, though the record was exciting and new. Alexis Korner's Blues Incorporated spearheaded the blues boom of the late 60's and encouraged John to move down to London to join up with the new scene. In London, John soon secured enough work in the clubs to turn professional, under the name 'John Mayall's Bluesbreakers'.



The Bluesbreakers became a training ground for blues musicians, and many different artists passed through the band before John met up with Eric Clapton, with whom he recorded that legendary album. The line up consisted of Mayall on lead vocal, organ and harmonica, Clapton on lead guitar, Hughie Flint on drums and John Mc Vie on bass, who was replaced by Jack Bruce, as the band were teetotal, and McVie wasn't. Bass player Jack Bruce also later left with Clapton to form Cream, but were soon replaced. John gained a reputation for discovering and encouraging hot new talent to play his trademark hard interpretations of his favourite Chicago styled blues. Other members to leave the band to form their own groups were Peter Green, John Mc Vie and Mick Fleetwood who became Fleetwood Mac. Andy Fraser formed Free, and Mick Taylor joined The Rolling Stones.

John made an album in 1969 called 'The Turning Point' on which he made the decision to use all acoustic instruments, including saxophone, harmonica, flute and string bass, but no drummer. The song from this album 'Room to Move' was destined to be a rock classic, and scored John success in America. He received his first gold record for this album. John left England to live permanently in Laurel Canyon in Los Angeles, and began to form new bands with American musicians. Throughout the 70's, John worked with Red Holloway, Larry Taylor, Sugarcane Harris, Blue Mitchell and Harvey Mandel on various blues, rock and jazz inspired projects. As well as this he backed great blues artists T-Bone Walker, Sonny Boy Williamson and John Lee Hooker on their first English club tours.



Mayall with one of his hand-carved guitars; early 70's

By 1975 John Mayall had become bored and disillusioned, and was no longer working with big name stars in his band. Albums recorded during this era were of poor quality and were no longer highly anticipated, instead they were received with apathy. Mayall stopped recording, only played to small audiences in his local vicinity in California. He broke up with his wife and began a relationship with Maggie Parker, a singer/ songwriter who had been hired by Harvey Mandel as John's backing singer. Later the same year, a brush fire destroyed his Laurel canyon home, taking with it all John's personal property, his diaries, artworks, and master recordings.

In 1982 he reunited the Bluesbreakers along with Mick Taylor and Mick Fleetwood, for a couple of tours and staged a video concert film called Blues Alive, which featured Albert King, Buddy Guy, Etta James among other big names. A new Bluesbreakers lineup was launched in 1984 with guitarists Coco Montoya and Walter Trout, and drummer Joe Yuele.

He toured in Europe once in 1988 where he played to small club audiences who were enthusiastic about his return. He signed to Island records and released '*Chicago Line*' then in 1990 '*A Sense of Place*', which many considered to be his best album in many years. This was followed up in 1993 with '*Wake Up Call*' and 1995's '*Spinning Coin*'.

John Mayall is the only surviving 60's blues catalysts and has outlived all of his contemporaries, and has furthered the growth of blues more than any other English or white man, and has never deviated from his vision.



