

British blues legend John Mayall dead at 90

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4 August 2024

John Mayall, perhaps best known for his band the Bluesbreakers, as well as his nurturing of a host of British blues musicians, died last week at the age of 90. The news was posted on his Facebook page:

It is with heavy hearts that we bear the news that John Mayall passed away peacefully in his California home yesterday, July 22, 2024, surrounded by loving family. Health issues that forced John to end his epic touring career have finally led to peace for one of this world's greatest road warriors...

Mayall was called by many “the godfather of British blues” for his role in providing a “boot camp” for musicians such as Eric Clapton, Jack Bruce, Peter Green, Mick Taylor, Mick Fleetwood, John McVie, Charlie Watts and Aynsley Dunbar, who went on to achieve celebrity in other bands.

His own band, the Bluesbreakers, performed and recorded around the world under that name with some significant interruptions from 1966 until Mayall's death. The release that year of the album “Blues Breakers with Eric Clapton,” featured “Ramblin' On My Mind,” the first recording on which Clapton performed vocals. Shortly after its release, Clapton went on to join the rock band Cream with drummer Ginger Baker and bassist Jack Bruce, also a Mayall band alumnus. Apart from Mayall, the personnel of the Bluesbreakers changed continuously throughout its history.

Mayall was a multi-instrumentalist, having taught himself to play guitar, piano and harmonica early in life. Traditional Blues remained his musical staple throughout his life. For the countless musicians who performed with Mayall, either on stage or in the recording studio, their experience was like going back to the wellspring of blues. Mayall's consistent blues style had evolved through years of listening to, performing and befriending the musicians who performed the popular music of his time.

He was born in the Greater Manchester area. As the son of a performing jazz guitarist, music played a central role in his life from childhood. He spent many hours listening to his

father's expansive collection of 78 RPM jazz recordings. John was a preteen as World War II raged and his parents' marriage was breaking up due mainly to his father's drinking. The youth found refuge in his love for music, cinema and art. Popular music during the war included such cheery tunes as “You Are My Sunshine,” and “Chattanooga Choo-Choo.” In his autobiography, Mayall describes being “lulled to sleep by the records of Eddie Lang, Lonnie Johnson and Django Reinhardt.”

Mayall was 11 when the war ended. He then taught himself how to play his father's ukulele using a Ukulele-Banjo self-instruction book by British singer-actor-comedian George Formby, a childhood hero of his.

In his teenage years, Mayall became a student of art and applied to art school in Manchester. When he was 15 years old, he was awarded a copy of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In his 2019 autobiography, *Blues from Laurel Canyon*, Mayall remarks:

I don't think I'd done much serious reading until I got into this book. I found it very supportive of the way I felt about the horrible injustices of slavery, and the sorry plight of the African-American population at the time. This proved highly influential on my views when I became a professional musician.

Later, he expanded his own record collection to include the work of newly discovered boogie-woogie artists, such as, Mayall explains, “Pinetop Smith, Albert Ammons, Meade Lux Lewis, Cow Cow Davenport, Montana Taylor, Jimmy Yancey and Roosevelt Sykes.” Again, from his autobiography:

As my knowledge grew of who was who in the history of blues and boogie-woogie, I became more and more drawn to this music, heart and soul. I was in awe of the world of America where the music was born: it was hard to compare my lifestyle with the

honky-tonks, bars, juke joints and house rent parties that I read about.

This is the way American popular music took hold of the young generation in Britain after the war. It didn't take long for the flow of popular recordings from the US to become a torrent and become the major influence in postwar Britain. Later, the torrent reversed direction, so to speak.

After finishing art school in 1949, Mayall found employment as a store window dresser. He had artistic talent which enabled him to have a decent paying career while he continued to submerge himself in his love of music, buying records and learning not only about his favorite musicians, but their influences.

He was drafted as soon as he became 18 and spent the next three years doing National Service in the British armed forces. He served his time, finally being deployed to Korea after the armistice was signed. When he was back in Manchester, he enrolled in the Regional College of Art.

At that time a new phenomenon had arrived from America called rock'n'roll. Mayall's attention was more focused on bebop—the avant-garde movement in jazz, and on the racial strife that was happening in America. The gruesome beating and lynching of 14 year-old Emmet Till in Mississippi in 1955 for looking at a “white woman the wrong way” affected him deeply. Mayall's love of the African American music of the time was deepening.

In his final year of art school, he studied photography. This allowed him access to venues where American players performed such as “Oscar Peterson, Roy Eldridge, Sonny Stitt, Herb Ellis, Ray Brown, Ella Fitzgerald, Junior Mance, Willie Dixon, Memphis Slim and the entire Duke Ellington Orchestra.” Through his photography, Mayall says, “I felt a bond with the emotional make-up of black America.”

At the same time the phenomenon of “skiffle” music was sweeping Britain, encouraging young musicians to get guitars and set up small groups that the style helped generate. The music of Lead Belly was made popular by the most renowned of these groups led by Lonnie Donegan. The Beatles were a notable example of this tendency, much influenced by the black rock'n'roller, Little Richard. Jimmy Page, later of Led Zeppelin fame, was inspired by the skiffle movement.

Mayall moved to London in the early 1960s to perform in the vibrant music scene, where musical talent abounded, and he could try out many players to perform with. Guitarist Alexis Korner and harmonica player Cyril Davies were older London performers who were credited as the fathers of British blues. They were both very cosmopolitan individuals who broke the mold. Davies was the first in Britain to master

the mouth harp sound that Muddy Waters' band was making famous in Chicago's South Side. This was the musical maelstrom that the Bluesbreakers emerged from.

Mayall had met Mississippi-born artist J.B. Lenoir sometime after the formation of the Bluesbreakers. They were planning a studio album with Mayall's band as backup, but Lenoir died from misdiagnosed injuries after a car accident in April 1967. He nonetheless had a powerful influence on Mayall's music. On his 1967 album, “Crusade,” Mayall did a tribute titled “The Death of J.B. Lenoir.” He credits Lenoir for the philosophy, “you sing about your life and times.”

Early in 1968 the band did their first tour of American venues to great success. After a subsequent tour of Europe, and another studio album, Mayall returned to Los Angeles, taking up residence in the Laurel Canyon neighborhood, where he lived for the rest of his life. His 1969 album *Turning Point* included the song, “California” expressing his affection for the West Coast lifestyle, and the raucous harmonica of “Room To Move,” both of which became big hits.

Mayall, to his credit, dedicated himself to the music he came to love. He wrote and performed music in an honest and direct effort to be true to his own life. “One Life to Live” appeared on his 1988 album *Chicago Line*. It is an antiwar allegory treating his years spent in military service during the Korean War. It is exemplary of the style of J.B. Lenoir. Mayall released more than 50 albums during his life, but the turbulence and anti-establishment youth counterculture of the late 1960s was the atmosphere in which he thrived.

Mayall will best be remembered for the influence he had on others and the generous spirit in which he brought countless numbers of talented musicians to the blues.



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