

## Crossing Genres and Generations with John Mayer

by Jonathan Karp

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July 16<sup>th</sup> was the date of my mother's stone setting. She had died of Covid the previous summer – alone in a hospital in southern Florida. Protocols precluded family visitation, and at 93, ill with the coronavirus and long-worsening dementia, even phone communication was essentially impossible. But now, one year later, close family and friends gathered in the cemetery of the Conservative Jewish congregation in the suburban town of Norwalk, Connecticut, where my two sisters and I had grown up and which we'd long left behind.

Family. Mine was currently divided into two warring camps. It had long been that way, with only the alignment of antagonists shifting. On this particular day, the husbands of my sisters were not talking to one another. And on this particular Friday, in the middle of a month that scientists would declare the hottest in human history, the sun beat down mercilessly on the burial grounds, whose entirely shade-less central plot was where my mother now joined the husband who had predeceased her by over a decade.

This broiling mid-July afternoon was a melancholic memorial for our mother, but also, trivially, a day of some excitement for me. I had recently become an avid fan of the singer-songwriter John Mayer, and July 16<sup>th</sup> was also the day of the release of his eagerly awaited new album, *Sob Rock*, his first in four years. Navigating the winding wooded roads of East Norwalk toward the cemetery, I had only a few minutes to catch some of the new songs, but one set of lyrics immediately caught my attention:

“Hurt me once, I’ll let it be  
hurt me twice, you’re dead to me  
[but] three times makes you family....”

In fact, the two events – the stone setting and the album release – were not entirely unrelated. Like me, Mayer is a native of these parts. He is a child of affluent Fairfield County, the middle of three sons of educators, his father a high school principal, his mother an English teacher. Mayer's dad, Richard, was born in 1927, the same year as my mom, while she and Mayer shared the same birthday, exactly fifty years apart. Mayer I am the youngest of my siblings, and

although my father was about 40 when I was born and Mayer's exactly 50, I can relate to the experience of growing up with a parent who was no longer youthful. In one of his early songs, "Stop This Train," Mayer writes about helplessly watching his parents age.

I'm so scared of getting older  
I'm only good at being young  
So I play the numbers game  
To find a way to say my life has just begun

Had a talk with my old man  
Said, "Help me understand"  
He said "Turn 68, you'll re-negotiate...  
John, honestly we'll never stop this train"

Although 17 years my junior, I found it intriguing that my nondescript suburban town could have produced a bonafide rock star. Mayer is a notable blues guitarist – he's played with such giants as B.B. King and Buddy Guy. No less a practitioner than Eric Clapton proclaimed him a master of the instrument. At times his music channels the soul and funk of Ray Charles, Marvin Gaye and Al Green. An early live recording finds him opening with a blistering blues solo, and announcing tongue-in-cheek, "this one is from the birthplace of the blues, Fairfield Connecticut." I was a Jewish kid who had gone to a wealthy prep school where I sometimes watched fellow students play polo on neighboring Westport's bucolic fields. Neither Jews, blacks, nor blues fit comfortably into this scenario. Mayer's father is Jewish. Like me he grew up in a WASP bastion. Like me he is a devotee of African American music. But unlike me he became a practitioner of it too.

Seeing my parents' names engraved in stone for the first time, made me want to cry. An album called *Sob Rock* seemed like it would provide the perfect accompaniment. Yet, thinking of this moment now, it strikes me as odd that as a 60-year-old man I would seek consolation in the popular music of a much younger one. I guess that's just the way pop music is. You are a creature of the tastes formed in your youth – mostly teenagerdom through early twenties. Those are the years when you look to commercial radio (in my day, the hit stations on the AM dial) for the musical touchstones of shared generational experience, and for the dubious guidance that current hits offer in matters of love and sex. Later on, you likely remember where you were when you first encountered that entrancingly perfect pop song, and who you were with, wanted to be with, or couldn't be with. The breakup songs (Gordon Lightfoot's "If You Could Read My Mind"), the makeup songs (Al Green's "Let's Stay Together"), and the songs of unimaginable sweet seduction (Marvin Gaye's "Let's Get It On").

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My musical sensibilities were shaped in the late 60s and early 70s, an era most would agree was a brilliant one for popular music. My sisters – the very ones engaged in an awkward standoff at the ceremony marking the unveiling of our mother’s headstone – were the first to open my ears and eyes to it. Respectively ten and six years older than me, as a child I loved to rifle through their extensive collections (both LPs and 45s), captivated by the psychedelic art on the album covers fashionable at the time, by groups with such exotic names as Lothar and the Hand People or The Thirteenth Floor Elevators. I couldn’t wait for my siblings to leave the house so that I could slip the vinyl records out of their sleeves and surreptitiously drop them on the cheap turntable they shared. I can still recall the palpable thrill I felt hearing for the first time The Who’s *Tommy*, both frightened and intrigued by the mysterious saga of the “deaf, dumb and blind boy” who “sure playsw a mean pinball.” My appetite whetted, I spent increasing numbers of adolescent hours locked in my bedroom listening to the top 40 stations, the same songs over and over and over.

That was the start of a lifelong avocation as an obsessive listener (when people ask me if I play something, I tell them, yes, records!). Since those early days great songs have been my drug and daily insatiable need. I not only kept listening to contemporary music well into my 20s, but I combed the oldie stations and history books for clues to the classics of earlier decades. All the way back, in fact, to the chestnuts of the American songbook – to Berlin, Gershwin, Rodgers and Kern. Remember The Beatles’ song “Your Mother Should Know”? My late mother had an almost encyclopedic knowledge of the words and music of American pop songs from the twenties to forties and would even sing them with very little prompting. I plumbed the depths of her memory for information, but also went back even further, to music that, as Paul McCartney sang, was made well before my mother was born (“although she was born a long, long time ago!”).

I was certainly a well-informed pop music aficionado. But after my twenties, my curiosity sent me in only one direction, backward. I suppose this happens to most of us; we stop growing up with the popular music of the moment. At some point, I was listening more to the music made by people much older than I, and far less to what was selling to those younger. You know you’re really superannuated when the oldies station starts playing songs that became hits in the decade *after* you stopped keeping up with the hits. Certainly, there were exceptions; I enjoyed the sharp-edged, innovative soul singing of Mary K. Blige; I also felt obligated to know something about rap and hip-hop, and in the Notorious B.I.G., in particular, I found a congenial and thrilling guide.

I know that some parents try to get into the music that their kids like, but that always struck me as a transparently Peter Panish, an effort to make yourself appear up to date by pretending that you don’t think their tastes are as essentially puerile as your parents viewed yours. It’s a lose-

lose strategy: you either get stuck in the past or you come off as phony, fashion-driven, or devoid of mature taste. When my older kids were young, the popular fare was either of the Miley Cyrus type whom they worshiped on tv as “Hannah Montana”, or graphic rap music with every third word bleeped out by the censors. But I can still remember the moment in the early fall of 2006, in the car with my then 5-year-old son, by chance turning on the local station that was playing not the oldies but the *current* hits. Something came on that made me prick up my ears. It was a bit Marvin Gaye-ish with gentle, soulful beats a la “What’s Going On.” But the voice was not Marvin’s. And the catchy hook-filled melodic lines weren’t the song’s only attractive feature. The lyric was actually interesting, even thought-provoking.

Me and all my friends  
We're all misunderstood  
They say we stand for nothing and  
There's no way we ever could  
Now we see everything that's going wrong  
With the world and those who lead it  
We just feel like we don't have the means  
To rise above and beat it

So we keep waiting (waiting)  
Waiting on the world to change...

The words certainly evoked the late 60s, but the sensibility was strikingly different. This wasn’t a protest song, exactly, or a call to arms. Written in the wake of the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, It was curiously an *explanation*, almost an apologia for the passivity of the younger generation in the face of reckless war and military adventurism. Passivity, not apathy. The lyrics make it clear that the singer was troubled by the state of the world but felt helpless to effect solutions. “It’s not that we don’t care/ we just know that the fight ain’t fair.” It captured the despair of a period that followed the get-rich liberalism of the Clinton years with the fraudulent war mongering of the Bush era. Some listeners thought the message cynical, but that would be a misreading. The songwriter doesn’t spare his own generation. As he caustically observes, “It’s hard to beat the system when you’re standing at a distance.” In fact, the song’s gentle, pleasant sweep belied the world-weariness of its young creator. It was both catchy *and* provocative. It had been many years since I’d heard a concoction that so seamlessly matched the infectious with the reflective. While comparisons with the iconic are generally invidious, John Mayer’s “Waiting on the World to Change” reminded me just a bit of a young Dylan’s anthem “Blowin’ in the Wind.”

Still, I barely took the time to explore whether Mayer was really a new Bob Dylan (of course, he was not). Instead, I continued looking backward – at the time even writing an article about Dylan’s own indebtedness to the American commercial songwriting tradition known as “Tin Pan

Alley” which dates back to the Berlins and Gershwins and Kerns. My only other encounter with Mayer around this time was a track off of an album featuring a series of collaborations with the renowned jazz pianist Herbie Hancock. Despite duets with such notables as Stevie Wonder and Paul Simon, the track that really caught my attention was called “Stitched Up,” a sleekly skillful morsel of funk written and sung by Mayer about feeling too sexually intimidated by the advances of a beautiful women to explore the possibilities of an actual encounter with her (“Possibilities” is the name of the album). Like “Waiting on the World to Change” it combined the fresh with the familiar. Only in retrospect do I realize that these two songs share a characteristic feature of Mayer’s sensibility, his restraint and hesitation in the face of commitment; seductively flashing the potential torrent of release and consummation only to pull back, as if always on the verge but “still waiting.” I did take a moment to wonder, “who *is* this guy?” Still, even then I didn’t follow my nose. To the contrary, I remained entirely ignorant of the fact that by this time, Mayer had already released three platinum albums and charted a handful of top hits beyond “Waiting on the World to Change” – one with the cringeworthy title “Your Body is a Wonderland,” and another almost as disturbingly called “Daughters.”

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It wasn’t until my own daughter was in her early twenties, and I was driving her from upstate New York to her apartment in Brooklyn that Mayer entered my consciousness again. To be clear, this was not 2006 when “Waiting” came out, but 2018, well after he had passed the pinnacle of his stardom. Usually drives with my daughter involved subjecting her to my playlists consisting of painstakingly curated sequences of R&B classics, folk ditties, 60s rock gems, and occasional jazz pieces – most of which she had long ago absorbed and mastered. But why should I listen to anything new, since obviously, great pop music was a thing of the past? Thankfully, for once she prevailed, and we piped her John Mayer song sequence through the car speakers.

Listening closely, I found myself swallowing hard. I spent long stretches of the next several months listening systematically in chronological order to Mayer’s seven studio albums, comprised almost entirely of original material, along with two live concert releases that themselves included a number of previously unrecorded Mayer songs. I counted a solid 50 superbly crafted, melodically engrossing, and lyrically intriguing songs – maybe more. Again, I asked myself, who is this guy? He had produced a catalogue of music that rivaled anyone’s on the contemporary American pop scene – and that indeed could respectably stand with the finest singer-songwriters of the previous era: Buddy Holly, Carole King, Stevie Nicks and perhaps even Joni Mitchel, Paul Simon, Stevie Wonder, Al Green and Prince. How had I missed it? How had I allowed my prejudices against musicians younger than myself stand in the way of appreciating a genuine pop music genius?

At least I had the consolation of being in good company. While Mayer has had his admirers among the critics, he has had no real champion. If anything, the critical reaction to his work has been grudging, acknowledging his talent but earnestly wishing that he knew better how to do it justice. For the most part Mayer has prompted annoyance among the opinion makers: his pop songs are lightweight, his persona grating, his behavior abominable.

Actually, Mayer was something of a golden boy in his first years on the scene. His initial success came at a remarkably young age. His debut album, *Room for Squares*, a hip insider's reference to a recording by 1950s hard bop saxophonist Hank Mobley, was one of the 2001's chart-toppers, ultimately selling 4.5 million copies. Mayer, looking even younger than his 23 years, accepted that year's Grammy award for best male pop vocalist with what sounded like an apology, insisting "this is very, very fast, and I promise to catch up." The remark, seemingly humble, actually reflected a high degree of self-evaluation, as if to say, "wait a minute folks, you ain't heard nothing yet!"

Mayer never seems to have harbored much musical self-doubt. He has spoken repeatedly and with some bitterness of his parents' prolonged skepticism regarding his professional aspirations, dragging him in his high school years to a therapist because they feared he spent too much time in his room at night practicing guitar at the expense of studying for his classes. If even his acceptance to Boston's prestigious Berkeley School of Music did not reassure them, one can only guess at their reaction when he dropped out after only a year, insisting "I don't need the instructions anymore." But it wasn't exactly arrogance that dictated his decision to leave. Even at 19 he simply understood that the goal was not to become technically the best guitar student but rather for "the entire student body to become my audience." And they would do so, he realized, not in the halls of academia but only once his star ascended in the world of commercial music.

This seeming overnight success is surely one reason why critics have generally failed to treat Mayer as a serious artist. His sudden mass popularity, teen idol looks and appeal to hordes of screaming fans, even the cottony quality of his vocals, were not readily conducive to his own clear ambitions for both sales *and* critical acclaim. Mayer's identity as a straight white male from Country Club Connecticut probably didn't help either at a time when the rock music establishment slouching toward gender and ethnic diversity. His first two albums were indeed accomplished works, brimming with skillful, introspective songwriting and surprisingly intricate jazzy-pop arrangements. His style then bore at least superficial comparison with that of a host of talented, sophisticated singer-songwriters like Ben Folds, Dave Matthews, and Jason Mraz, all of whom emerged on the scene almost simultaneously with him.

But Mayer's third studio album, *Continuum*, should have swept away all such comparisons. As critic Matt Collier writes in his retrospective capsule review for the website [allmusic.com](http://allmusic.com), "nothing he did up until [then] could have prepared you for the monumental creative leap

forward that is Mayer's 2006 studio effort, *Continuum*.” True, the previous year, he had issued a live record *Try!* under the rubric of “The John Mayer Trio,” with its unmistakable signaling of an earlier era’s jazz and blues combos, when music, presumably, rather than persona was all that mattered. *Try!* revealed Mayer as not just a talented songwriter, but a creative musician steeped in the electric blues tradition the Kings (Albert, Freddie, and B.B.) as mediated through such boyhood heroes Jimi Hendrix and Stevie Ray Vaughan. But *Continuum* was the recording that brought together the full scope of Mayer’s remarkable talents: his top-flight musicianship, a newfound vocal intensity of a true soul singer, and songs so good they sounded like long mislaid classics. All of Mayer’s subsequent work would be tested against the high bar set by *Continuum*, and usually judged deficient. But that is a little like judging the Beatles *White Album* as substandard in comparison with *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*.

Admittedly, *Continuum* was no *Sgt. Pepper* – there was nothing particularly innovative or experimental about it. If Mayer has a chink in his genius, it is that he does not drive popular music into new terrains. He is a classicist, a conservator of the best aspects of American pop, and in this regard, *Continuum* was only the start. On the basis of *Try!* and *Continuum*, one might have assumed that at heart he was an old bluesman reincarnated and transported from the Mississippi delta to the unlikely locale of Fairfield County. Like Superman, he was “a strange visitor from another planet” (a childhood photo shows him in caped superhero mode). But Mayer wasn’t really interested in being pigeonholed as a blues revivalist, along the lines of Robert Cray or Joe Bonamassa. While not a creator of new styles, Mayer is equally determined not to be the master of just one.

Hidden among the more glittering riches of *Continuum* lay a ditty entitled “Heart of Life,” which hinted at a capacity to write in a vein that was neither the power pop nor blues-funk, but instead something closer to a folksy Americana. While he followed up *Continuum* with a strong collection of mostly love songs, tellingly entitled *Battle Studies* (with song titles like “Heartbreak Warfare” and “Assassin”), it was his 2012 release *Born and Raised* that marked a new departure.

Given its focus on blues-rock and rhythm and blues, *Continuum* seemed to make the claim for Mayer as a rock classicist. But *Born and Raised* was elegiac in a different sense. It showed that Mayer was at home in the broad spectrum of 1960s and 70s American pop music, not just the urban black sounds of Memphis soul but the strains of the rural white homestead, celebrated by Nashville. In the late sixties, groups like the Byrds and Moby Grape had fashioned a style that modernized country & western, expanded its topical range of its lyrics, and injected it with counter-culture hippie sensibilities. By the early seventies this hybrid migrated from San Francisco to L.A., shedding its psychedelic coating while adding workmanlike discipline and professional polish, thus laying the foundation of a Laurel Canyon sound that blended singer-songwriter sensitivity with a neo-cowboy brand of cool.

In the bigger scheme of things, this was but a further iteration of the continuous pendulum swing in American pop music between black urbanity, on the one hand, and white pastoralism, on the other – a tug of war, if you will, between Gershwin’s *Porgy & Bess* and Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Oklahoma!* The dynamic can be found in almost every era. White artists more than black ones are permitted to indulge it (with Ray Charles’s *Modern Sounds in Country & Western Music* proving the rare exception). And it plays out too Mayer’s own artistic trajectory. Having established his blues chops and street credibility with *Continuum*, he laid claim to white picket fences in *Born and Raised*. His new pose of Mexican poncho and Stetson hat suited him at least as well (or poorly) as had his previous dark-suited Blues Brother getup.

Of course, however affected the self-presentation, it was the music that really mattered. And what’s striking is that *Born and Raised* matched *Continuum* if not in genre and style then certainly in the outstanding quality of its songs. In both he showed off a capacity to emulate a classic American pop sound without seeming derivative. Certainly, there are deliberate echoes of the familiar everywhere -- not just the Joni Mitchell shout out on “Queen of California,” or the Neil Young harmonica style intro on “Whiskey, Whiskey, Whiskey,” or the George Harrison guitar fill on “Shadow Days.” “A Face to Call Home” sounds like an envious cousin of Graham Nash’s “Our House”; “Born and Raised” is the best coming-of-age lyric since Murray McLauchlan’s “Child Song”; “Speak for Me” is a lovely number that Paul Simon forgot to pen; “Love is a Verb” is the greatest vocal performance James Taylor never recorded. And the list goes on. John Mayer goes toe-to-toe with the best of Laurel Canyon and at least breaks even. The man’s creative fecundity seemed astonishing. Whatever he neglected to include on *Born and Raised* apparently wound up on its 2013 follow up, the only slightly inferior *Paradise Valley*. And it’s not as if his powers ebbed along with his popularity. Mayer’s songwriting skills were never put to more extraordinary display than on the 2017 *The Search for Everything*, where he pulled out all the stops, writing in the many styles he had hitherto mastered, and then some. Though less of a concentrated statement, that album rivals *Continuum* as his finest.

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Yet all was not well in Mayer country. The seemingly charmed life of the Fairfield County *Wunderkind* showed signs of tarnishing with age. Mayer probably peaked as a pop icon at the time of *Battle Studies*. He then experienced a number of mishaps and misjudgments. Even at the relatively ripe age of 31 he felt damaged by his parents’ late divorce in 2009. As he proclaimed in *Born and Raised*:

“Still got time, still got faith,”  
“I call on both of my brothers  
I got a mom, I got a dad



But they do not have each other.”

In 2011 a serious health scare threatened his career if not his life, followed by a series of self-inflicted wounds resulting from what can only be described as appalling judgment. On his very first album, Mayer had included a song called “My Stupid Mouth” that seemed to presage everything that went wrong in the notorious interview he did with *Playboy* magazine in 2010.

My stupid mouth  
Has got me in trouble  
I said too much again

Even though his “mama said ‘think before speaking,’” there is “no filter in his head.” Still, he tries to justify himself:

Why is it my fault?  
So maybe I try too hard  
But it's all because of this desire  
I just want to be liked  
I just want to be funny  
Looks like the jokes on me  
So call me captain backfire

Captain backfire, indeed. Who hasn't had the experience of saying too much to an acquaintance who is no intimate friend, and regretting it right away but only too late? One can only imagine the *Playboy* interviewer's astonished delight at his subject's willingness to self-destruct right there on the tape recorder. Mistaking shock-value for frankness and boorishness for candor, Mayer seemed to deliberately cross every taboo line he could find on matters of sex and race. Gloating about his acceptance by black fellow musicians, he wielded the N-word like it was a matter of personal privilege, as if he forgot that calling Fairfield, CT the “birthplace of the blues” was actually his own joke. Today we would say he exposed his white privilege for all to see. As for his remarks about famous ex-girlfriends, to say they were ungentlemanly would be a quaint understatement. Fascination with the romantic ups and downs of celebrity favorites is a curious aspect of fan obsession, but Mayer's conspicuous consumption of partners tested the patience of even his most indulgent followers. “I made a bad name for my game 'round town/  
Tore out my heart and shut it down,” he sang in “Perfectly Lonely.” In 2010 the Country Pop star Taylor Swift released “Dear John,” a withering denunciation of a manipulative older lover, widely assumed addressed to Mayer, with whom she had a year-long relationship. Swift, twelve years Mayer's junior, was already starting to eclipse him in success and popularity. Her legions of fans would not soon forgive the man who had elicited such a rebuke from their idol.

A year later Mayer was diagnosed with a granuloma in his throat, a tumor-like growth brought on or at least aggravated by his alcoholism.

Whiskey, whiskey, whiskey  
Water, water, water -- sleep  
Whiskey, whiskey, whiskey  
Wake up, shake it off, and repeat

The struggle for health and sobriety, including two throat surgeries, required adjustments not only to his lifestyle but also to his singing approach. He lost considerable vocal range and found it difficult to render some of his hits faithfully. While Mayer took a temporary vow of silence (unlike Donald Trump, he took *himself* off Twitter) and sought to rehabilitate his image, the damage incurred during these years has proved lasting. No longer a megastar or even a darling of the critics (if he ever was), Mayer struggled to rebuild his reputation through the mentoring of younger musicians and the taming, within reason, of his loquacity. Whether through self-restraint or the decline in media interest, his relationship stumbles – especially after pop star Katy Perry called it quits on him in 2014 – ceased to be the fodder for *People* Magazine-style cover stories.

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I knew nothing of these foibles when my daughter schooled me Mayerically on that fateful car trip to Brooklyn. But it did make me wonder, what else had I been too earless to really hear? Mayer seemed to embody a capacious receptivity to the widest range of ages and styles. He paid homage to his elders like Barbra Streisand and Tony Bennett, both of whom invited him to perform on their respective “Duets” albums. He lauded his contemporaries, praising effusively the songwriting skills of Ben Folds, Keith Urban and Alecia Keys and recorded a gorgeous rendition of Beyoncé’s tune “XO” on his *The Search for Everything* album. But he also heartily championed younger talents, including some who were destined to surpass him in popularity-- like Ed Sheeran and Sean Mendes. He even compelled me to reexamine my easy contempt for the music my kids had grown up on. Mayer unstintingly extolled the talents, for instance, of Miley Cyrus, describing her *Dead Petz* album as “a masterwork of whack genius.”

The Rip Van Winkle syndrome can be as liberating as it is disorienting. When I openly confessed my Mayer fandom to the undergraduates in a college course I was teaching, the students seemed surprised that I would appreciate an artist as close in age to them as to me. They’d certainly all heard of him. I only understood why when I announced one day that I would be leaving class a little early because I was driving to a concert on Long Island. “Who are you going to see,” one of them asked, “John Mayer?” “Yes, sort of,” I responded. “I’m actually going to see *Dead & Company*.” Laughter rippled through the room. Two of the kids stood up to reveal

they were wearing *Grateful Dead* T-shirts. Now, it was I who was stunned. You mean, these twenty-year-olds are actually *Dead* fans?

Perhaps Mayer's most interesting career move in the second half of the decade was also his most surprising: partnering with *Grateful Dead* co-founder Bob Weir to form *Dead & Company*, a concert band devoted to performing the music of the venerable San Francisco rock band. *Dead & Co.* is comprised of a handful of original members alongside "newcomers" like bassist Oteil Burbride and keyboard player Jeff Chimenti. *Interlopers* might be a more apt term, particularly when it comes to Mayer, who for many of the band's worshipful fans had the chutzpah to take on the lead guitar role of Jerry Garcia, who died in 1995. After all, Jerry Garcia was the *Grateful Dead*! His shoes could never be filled, let alone by an ageing pretty boy who had first found fame with a song called "Your Body is a Wonderland."

Yet if Mayer and Weir made odd Deadfellows, playing lead with *Dead & Co.* did offer Mayer a fresh set of opportunities just when he seemed to need them: the chance to submerge his identity, hitherto that of a solo artist (the "John Mayer Trio" notwithstanding), into a collective, to master a catalogue that drew from all streams of musical Americana (folk, blues, bluegrass, even freeform jazz), and to gratify his guitar god yearnings in a musically appropriate manner (since "restraint" is not a recognizable category when it comes to extended noodling in the Garcia tradition). Jerry Garcia was a highly original guitar player, and Mayer labored hard to evoke his style without imitating it. And, as my surprising classroom discovery revealed, this new side-gig offered him the possibility of connecting with a large and fanatically devoted fan base that included many young people who had been born *after* Jerry Garcia had passed.

I hadn't attended a *Dead* concert since my senior year in High School, when they were already elder statesmen of the Rock scene. Now I was revisiting my long-ago past accompanied by my own grown-up daughter, who found my infatuation with Mayer amusing if slightly bizarre – especially if it brought me to a revival show for a band she had never heard me listening to (and perhaps disdaining) while she was growing up. On the grounds of the Nassau Colosseum, we had no trouble selling our extra ticket to a longtime fan who had arrived in faithful certainty that he would score one for a decent price. When I fished for information about how the "new" guitar player was being received by fans like him, he confessed he didn't know any of Mayer's own songs and didn't really care to. All that mattered was that this "kid" (Mayer was then 41 but easily the youngest member of the band) proved committed to the cause. And while of course he was no Jerry, he sure could play the hell out of his guitar! For Deadheads, however appreciative, it is axiomatic that it is Mayer who is elevated by the association, not the other way around.

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In light of all these moves, this year's release of *Sob Rock* offered Mayer the chance of a comeback. And it did briefly hit #1 on the Billboard top 200, before mostly slipping out of sight. Certainly, the album had received considerable promotion. It's teaser single, "Last Train Home," was released a month prior to the rest of the album and garnered positive write-ups in *The Times* and elsewhere. Mayer performed several of the album's new songs on late night tv shows like *The Tonight Show*. But given all the hype, the album was largely greeted by critics with disappointment, even derision. The same *Times* critic who had lauded "Last Train Home" a month earlier now panned the album as "empty ... excess," and pronounced it, of all things for a John Mayer record, "short on hooks."

What may have hurt was that several of its songs— among them two of the best -- had already been released on their own in the preceding couple of years. Among these, "New Light" is one of best records Mayer has ever created. It's a hilarious plea for a romantic second chance by an aging lover "pushing forty in the friend's zone," with tackily brilliant disco guitar riffs and an utterly infectious melody line. No shortage of hooks there. The other, entitled "I Guess I Just Feel Like," is a kind of Trump-era companion piece to "Waiting on the World to Change." By now the world has indeed changed – but only for the worse. No longer just passive, we are all complicit.

Nobody's honest  
Nobody's true  
Everyone's lying  
To make it on through  
I guess I just feel like  
I'm the same way too

The love the singer once expected to save us "from a world gone mad" has fallen short. Instead, the "joke's getting old/ the future is fading/ and the past is on hold." But despair as he might, hope still remains. "And if I go blind/ I'll still find my way/ I guess I just felt like/ Giving up today." It is a dour reflection of the mood of the moment, embedded in another lovely Mayer melody and punctuated by one of his most blistering guitar solos ever.

Still, most of the other songs on *Sob Rock* are rather uninspired and all-too-often self-pitying breakup songs, though even the breakup in question seems like a stale retread. A music blogger at the University of North Carolina concluded that despite all of Mayer's many self-reinventions, one thing has remained consistent: "the guy sucks at relationships." On the other hand, do we really want to judge pop stars on the basis of their messy love lives? Is that how we should assess Jerry Lee Lewis, or for that matter, Frank Sinatra? I can't help but recall the late Gregg Allman, in the wake of his sixth divorce, conceding in a moment of crystalline self-awareness: "I'm starting to think that maybe *I* might be the problem." *Sob Rock* is not weak because it's filled

with songs of relationship breakdown, but because the songs sound generic. And for a genre master like John Mayer, that simply won't fly.

And yet, a negative evaluation of the record might just be too pat. The album is more than the sum of its parts precisely because it's aim is conceptual. It is indeed a kind of concept album in which Mayer both pays tribute to and affectionately mocks the pop sensibility of his own 1980s adolescence, the synth slathered, multi-layered and gloriously overproduced "Yacht Rock" of groups like *Toto* and *Foreigner*. My problem is that this is precisely the kind of music that when it originally came out made me want to stop listening to the present and retreat far, far into the musical past. So maybe the album had to be inferior because the music of that era was inferior in the first place. Or maybe, like the oldies stations today, John Mayer's own nostalgia has finally superseded me. Stop this train!

The interesting thing is that *Sob Rock* is Mayer's first and so-far only even arguably disappointing release. After twenty years and eight studio albums, that is certainly a record equaled by few other singer-songwriters. Some artists "burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars," to quote Jack Kerouac. They flame out after a glorious decade or so of incandescent creativity, either suffering a sudden, tragic end or a long, painful decline. Others manage to revitalize themselves even after long creative draughts. Mayer is a survivor who continuously surprises with musical self-reinventions.

*The Search for Everything* (the title of Mayer's magnificent 2017 break-up album) is a search for inspiration, somewhere, anywhere: in a new genre, be it pop, blues, or folk rock; in new associations like Dead & Company; or in a new love. That album also tellingly features a sweetly philosophical meditation on mortality, taking in the big picture, you might say, entitled "Your Gonna Live Forever in Me." Mayer performed it in 2020 with slightly adjusted lyrics to commemorate the victims of Covid-19.

A great big bang and dinosaurs  
Fiery raining meteors  
It all ends unfortunately  
But you're gonna live forever in me  
I'll guarantee, just wait and see

Life is full of sweet mistakes  
And love's an honest one to make  
Time leaves no fruit on the tree  
But you're gonna live forever in me  
I guarantee, it's just meant to be

This brings me full circle back to my own mother's passing from the same disease. Even on the dismal occasion of her stone setting, when I might feel like "giving up today," John Mayer is the rare artist who can help you make it through.