

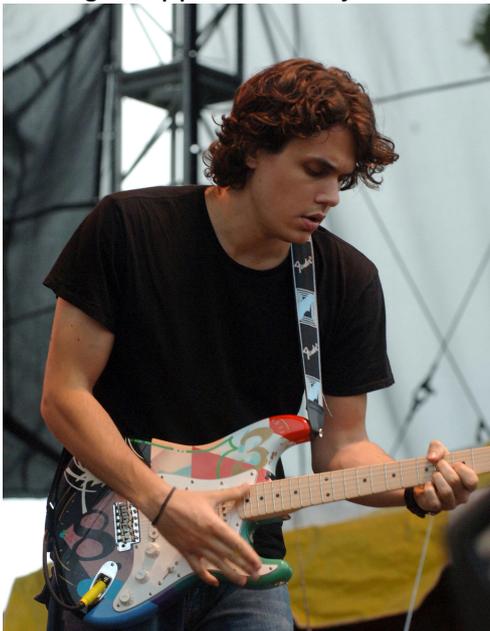


As a music fan of ever-so-discriminating taste, I'm supposed to hate John Mayer. His poofy locks are supposed to prompt me to reach for a machete. His inability to turn down any media appearance ("and now, live from G4's First Annual Internet Avatar Awards, John Mayer!") is supposed to tempt me to pull an Elvis on my TV set. His so-gentle lyrical platitudes - especially in "Daughters," in which he warbles about gals who are "just like a maze/where all of the walls all continually change" (nice syntax, fella) - are supposed to make me wish upon him a life of stale bread and regularly scheduled cock-punchings.

And yet, I find myself kinda digging the guy, for the sole reason that he is legit on the ol' gee-tar.

No, seriously. I mean this. Hear me out. When Mayer arrived on the scene, it was as a n¼-sensitive balladeer with DREAMY!!!! looks that made the young gals feel all tingly downstairs. He didn't play much guitar on his first few records - not that I would've noticed if he did, given my sonic allergies to "Your Body Is a Wonderland" and any song within 20 miles of it.

And then, something snapped. A few years back, he talked drummer Steve Jordan and bassist Pino Palladino,



aces both, into serving as the backbone of the John Mayer Trio. My first thought upon hearing this news, of course, was to wonder if somebody had stolen their identities and emptied their bank accounts, thereby relegating them to musical baby-sitting duty for a brat like Mayer.

Upon watching one of the Trio's gigs on TV, however, I got it. Jordan and Palladino obviously recognized something in Mayer that the lad's image minions didn't let the rest of us see: That while Mayer was willing to play the game, to so speak, by allowing himself to be marketed as a hirsute 21st century James Taylor, his true interest lies in playing rather than preening.

Yes, I realize it's unfair to attempt to divine somebody's professional motives and passions from afar. But anybody who saw the second half of Mayer's "Austin City Limits" appearance fronting the remaining members of Stevie Ray Vaughan's Double Trouble couldn't help but be taken in by the enthusiasm and energy, sorely lacking in his myriad awards-show performances of "Why Georgia?". Riffing around with Buddy Guy and Herbie Hancock, it seems, is a touch more rewarding than dodging the paparazzi with Jessica Simpson, professionally if not, uh, bodily.

As a guitarist, Mayer is fluid but not overly showy, Robert Cray-ish in approach and vaguely Derek Trucks-ish in tone. He tends to lay back for a few bars before dropping the hammer, rather than exploding into a solo at its outset. Really, if Mayer has a fault as a guitarist, it's that he doesn't go to the well often enough. Any number of his gentle ballads could use a 16-bar Stratocaster pick-me-up.

I'd advise Mayer newbies start with the John Mayer Trio live LP *Try*, paying special attention to the Hendrix and Ray Charles covers ("Wait Until Tomorrow" and "I Got a Woman"). He does a fine job of channeling Cray on "I Don't Trust Myself (With Loving You)" and Derek and the Dominoes-era Clapton on "Gravity," both off *Continuum*

. When the Sundance Channel's new "Live From Abbey Road" series debuts in a few months, be sure to check out his guitar-first sentiments before a performance of... well, something or other in which he reverts to sensitive-guy mode. Old habits are hard to break.

I'm never going to dig Mayer's hunkthrob-songwriter material, and I won't ever be quick enough to disable the radio the moment when the first notes of too-well-intentioned dreck like "No Such Thing" start to chime. But given a choice between the circa-2007 John Mayer and the circa-2007 Eric Clapton, I'll take axeman-mode Mayer any day of the week. It's not even all that close.