

Written by Jeff Ignatius

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For the music career of singer/guitarist Coco Montoya, thank the persistence of John Mayall.

It's not merely that Mayall called Montoya to ask him to join the legendary Bluesbreakers band in the early 1980s. It's that he called *back* when Montoya – who had quit music as a profession after a stint drumming for Albert Collins in the 1970s – hung up on him.

“I didn't think it was him,” Montoya said in a recent phone interview, promoting his Saturday bandshell performance at the Mississippi Valley Blues Festival. “I was bartending at a British pub. ... So I thought it was some of the English cats in there teasing me. ... He called back. ‘No, this really is John Mayall. ... Do I have to come down there ... ?’”

Montoya is the first to admit that getting the call didn't “make any sense at all.” After he left

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Collins' band and disco and funk ruled the pop charts, the self-taught drummer didn't see a place for himself in the music world, and "I didn't like being broke. ... I just packed it in. ... I like having a check. I like having money in my pocket. ...

"I wasn't in the music business anymore. I was just a [guitar] jammer. I was just having fun."

Mayall, he said, had heard him at a jam session one night, and it obviously made an impression. "John happened to be there when I got up there and played, and somebody told me John was in the audience; they said it was his birthday," Montoya said. "So I just did a bastardized version of the Otis Rush song 'All Your Love'" – the lead track on the 1966 album by the Bluesbreakers, then featuring Eric Clapton. "And apparently the sound man gave John a tape of it."

Montoya knew being a Bluesbreaker was a hugely lucky break: "'I'm actually going to be a Bluesbreaker for however long I last. I was there for a minute.' It ended up being 10 years."

But it wasn't an easy decade, he said: "After a while, once all the euphoria starts to come down, you start to realize what you're up against. It became difficult. ... You did have to live up to the ghosts of guitarists past" – from Clapton to Mick Taylor.

And live up to the spirits of guitarists *present*, as Montoya played alongside Kal David and then Walter Trout.

This period, he said, was detrimental in several ways, from booze and drugs to on-stage guitar feuds with Trout. "I drank a lot – for bravery, mostly," Montoya said. And "I didn't like to have guitar battles. ... [But] every night was a guitar battle. ... We weren't making music; we were just being competitive. That wasn't healthy." Still, he said, "People loved it."

There were also plenty of positives beyond the obvious prestige of the gig, said Montoya – who has now been sober for 18 years. "I've never been an overly confident player, or an overly confident person, either," he noted. But Collins – both a guitar mentor and father figure – and Mayall encouraged him to be comfortable with his skills and style: "You don't have to be Jimi

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Hendrix. You don't have to be Eric Clapton. You can be you. That's what this is. Your own identity. For better or for worse. Be at peace with that."

That self-assurance has led to a respected career as a solo artist known not just for his fiery guitar work but also his soul. From 1995 to 2007, he recorded three well-regarded albums apiece for the Blind Pig and Alligator labels.

Montoya said he's proud of those records, but he said the labels typically asked him to record some songs he didn't love with an eye toward sales.

That didn't happen with 2010's *I Want It All Back* on Ruf Records, a bold departure that saw Montoya given free reign – which he used to push himself out of his comfort zone.

Producer Keb' Mo', Montoya recalled, asked him some questions: "What songs do I like? What do I listen to on the road? I let him know I love '50s stuff, and doo-wop stuff, and soul stuff. He goes, 'Well, if I'm going to do this project ... I don't want to do another guitar album. You've got six albums; everybody knows you can play guitar.' And I just said, 'Well, what else do I do?' And he said, 'I'm going to concentrate on your voice. Nobody's really done that.' I said, 'Well, that was a challenge, because I never thought I was much of a singer anyway.'"

The premise for the album, he said, was "frightening." But the result, as the *All Music Guide* noted, worked: "There's plenty of piercingly lyrical guitar work, of course, but it's Montoya the singer who emerges as the dominant figure in these sessions, leaning into a smooth, soulful lilt that's not a million miles away from the sound of Los Lobos lead vocalist David Hidalgo. Not only that, Montoya is letting this cool-crooning approach lead him down different musical avenues" – including a gentle version of Jackson Browne's "Somebody's Baby."

Montoya said that Keb' Mo' warned him that he'd catch some flak for the record, and he did: "There's a few guys that really want to hear me play a million notes and play as loud as I can that got disappointed on this album."

But he said he's too old to do anything but listen to his own muse: "At 60 years old, I don't want

2012 Blues Fest – Finding His Soul: Coco Montoya (Saturday, June 30, 10 p.m., Bandshell)

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to be doing stuff that doesn't please me. ... At this point, I'm not going to be on MTV. ... The pop charts for me are not something I'm looking towards now. At this late stage in my career, I think I should be happy playing whatever it is I wish to play. ... And if it pleases my fan base, that's great"