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Re-Born on the Bayou: Creedence Clearwater Revival's Sophomore Album

By Michael Camfield

Creedence Clearwater Revival's sophomore album, *Bayou Country* (1969), is an ever-present reminder of the fundamental position songwriting holds as the key factor of a musician's success. The band's sound has been affectionately referred to as "economic," by critics, having no significant development beyond that of the archetypical rockabilly band (Unterberger). The lead guitar work is almost exclusively composed of blues scales played on a Fender Stratocaster in mid/neck pickup position, with the rhythm being played on either an acoustic guitar, or the occasional chime-y twang of a Les Paul or a Telecaster. The drums are recorded in mono, either center-panned or hard-panned, as was typical practice in all but the most cutting-edge recording studios of the time. The bluesy wailing of John Fogerty completes the signature CCR sound, chronologically nestled between the atmospheric minimalism of prior west coast artists, such as Spirit or The Doors, and foreshadows the future flamboyant performance standards of latter blues rock outfits such as Led Zeppelin and the Rolling Stones — post Brian Jones. In essence, Creedence's sonic output is generic at best, and uninspired at worst, yet discrediting the band for its choice in instrumentation would be a cynical takeaway from the project's irresistibly clever songwriting.

Despite being Creedence's sophomore album, *Bayou Country* marks a revelation in John Fogerty's songwriting technique so crucial to the success of the group, that CCR's true (self-titled) debut album could feasibly be critically overlooked as an amateur result of visionless trial and error, perhaps rightfully so. The band's generic approach to production was made painfully obvious by a track-list of marginally intriguing covers of prior rock and roll hits.

On the opposite side of the spectrum, *Bayou Country* incorporates the band's practical sound into a necessary cohesion, bridging Fogerty's esoteric lyricism — ranging from sophisticated philosophical inquiry to fictitious storytelling — with familiar pop conventions, augmented by a southeastern swampy ethos.

The opening track “Born on the Bayou,” a tongue-in-cheek acknowledgement of the Bay Area group's AstroTurf country aesthetic; merges elements of Motown rhythm and British guitar pop phrasing into a thoroughly irresistible blend of catchy melodies and energizing drum beats. The track is followed by “Bootleg,” a high-energy, yet conservatively delivered think piece about the allure of the forbidden. John Fogerty's lyrical delivery demonstrates a deeper understanding of artistic interpretation, as its contrast with the overarching instrumentation and (seemingly) conscious efforts to undersell may all be referential to the contrarianism addressed in the song itself.

Arguably the weakest track on the album is called “Graveyard Train.” Here, CCR attempts to merge vintage blues with a Merseybeat rhythm. The result is lackluster; raucous blues lines tonally clashing with the stoic backbeat that comes across as annoying and repetitive. Despite the song's musical shortcomings, lyrically speaking, the band's attraction to the blues scene isn't without justification. Again, the lyrics are top of their class; this time pushing for deep poetic interpretations of society, love, and death.

The magnum opus of *Bayou Country* — commercially and critically — is unquestionably “Proud Mary.” The song drew in copious success equally from delectable pop motifs, uncharacteristically sophisticated chord progression, and universally relatable— yet concise — lyricism. The song's storyline also depicts a subtle nuance in Fogerty's mentality regarding

thematic elements. Rather than appropriating or conforming to Dixie nationalism, Fogerty's lyrics often appear to use southern mannerisms as a metaphor for overarching sociopolitical concepts. With this distinction in mind, one could feasibly argue that *Bayou Country* is a concept album; constantly overstepping self-imposed boundaries with flourishes of wit, passion, and subversion, resulting in a timeless example of masterful songwriting.

The importance of subjectivity in regards to the criticism of art cannot be understated. Being able to personally contextualize an artwork stems from the very same aspects of humanity responsible for the overarching concept of oneself as a product of both an upbringing, as well as the perception of said upbringing. With that being said, it is perfectly feasible that two different reviews of the same album can seemingly contradict each other without necessarily being of opposing viewpoints. Ray Rezos in a Rolling Stone article on *Bayou Country* claims: "Creedence Clearwater Revival's new LP suffers from one major fault — inconsistency" (Rezos). Despite personally believing that the band's stylistic anchor is its relatively bland sound, nothing Rezos claims in his review of the album truly contests points made in *this* review, other than the application of the word "consistent." As previously mentioned, the band's generic sound is almost objectively consistent, however, an inconsistent level of inspiration becomes strikingly apparent regarding the development of deeper cuts. Furthermore, the same article makes the following statement on the group's sound: "the group has a solid overall sound; they lay down a heavy backing for Fogerty, and the result is a very tight sound" (Rezos). Despite a different choice in adjectives, the overall message Rezos' statement bears appears to be conceptually similar to *this* article's timbral summary — albeit less disdainful.

Unfortunately, contemporary album reviews are few and far between. Fortunately, *Rolling Stone* has reviewed *Bayou Country* twice over, with a much more positive summary in retrospect. Music critic Barry Waters touches on CCR's bizarre Louisiana mythos: "Leader John Fogerty instead invented an alternate identity for his band based on its otherwise unremarkable 1968 debut album's rumbling reinvention of a rock oldie... Fogerty discovered his songwriting voice on 1969's auspicious *Bayou Country* when he further explored the Louisiana roots of CCR's hit 'Suzie Q' cover." (Waters) As the conventions of pop music continue to develop over time, Creedence's deeper cuts may have been lost to obscurity, yet John Fogerty's lyricism continues to permeate the mainstream industry as a golden standard of ingenuity.

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[4/](#)