

The original idea, as John Lee Hooker told Melody Maker's Max Jones, was for The Groundhogs to back him and then do a record of their own, both for Vee Jay. The sessions did take place, in November 1965; a single by John Lee, coupling 'Mai Lee' (as you'll hear, he sings 'Mary Lee') and 'Don't Be Messing With My Bread', was issued on the small independent Planet label and The Groundhogs' 'Shake It' and 'Rock Me', apparently produced by Vee Jay's Calvin Carter, were issued in America on Interphon.

At the time, The Groundhogs were John Lee's favourite band. We know because he told Max Jones, 'I'm bound to say that John Lee and The Groundhogs are one of the number one best blues groups that you have over here, and it fits in with my type of music perfectly'. And that was no mean feat, because John Lee Hooker was, and still is, notorious for ignoring established bar structures. Tony McPhee, the Hogs' lead guitarist, informed Bob Brunning that, apparently, it was intentional. Hooker had said to him, 'I really like the way you know when I'm about to change chord, because sometimes I do 13 bars, sometimes I do 12 1/2'. McPhee was astonished, because, he said, 'I thought it was unconscious, but he knew exactly what he was doing'.

Back in the mid-60s, the Blues Boom was at its height and Hooker was caught between young audiences that didn't know what blues was but liked its energy and a masonic lodge of blues aficionados who demanded that he should perform in the manner to which they'd become accustomed. But there was mutiny in the latter's thin blue line. On July 8, 1964, Hooker and the Hogs played the Savoy

Ballroom, Cleveleys, near Blackpool. Blues Unlimited's reviewer noted that, 'Every number was received with enthusiasm to such a degree that five encores were performed in all. A special mention for the Groundhogs who throughout played admirably'.

In May 1965, another correspondent went to a Hooker gig at the Ricky Tick, Guildford and was highly offended by what he witnessed. Expecting to encounter 'frantic, delirious orgasms of rapture', he watched a show 'aimed at satisfying the fastidious and uninterested teenage audiences'. The anti-climax was too much: 'Hooker has had his chance, three times, and each time he has churned out the same rubbish. The onus must now fall on his shoulders. He has not only let himself down - he has failed the Blues'.

So, here's your chance to hear the sort of rubbish that John Lee was performing at the time. Of course, it's not rubbish at all. Although the songs are split into medium fast boogies and slow blues, John Lee's in strong form and the band are sensitive to his changes of direction. Here is the first recorded version of 'I Cover The Waterfront', which John has returned to recently in the company of Van Morrison. 'Seven Days' was a brand new song at the time which he'd told Max Jones he was about to record.

The version of the tapes heard here are also embellished with horn arrangements which were added to the album's issue on the American Wand label. On the odd occasion, they can be intrusive and sometimes they get a bit florid but whoever was responsible for the arrangements and their recording did a very competent job. John

Lee's worked with a few horn sections of them. By being overdubbed, they display an alertness that wouldn't be present on the original session. The fluttering apron among the excellent know how to enjoy music?

NEIL SLAVEN

JOHN LEE HOOKER - VOCALS, GUITAR
TOM PARKER - ORGAN, PIANO
TONY MCPHEE - GUITAR
PETE CRUICKSHANK - BASS
DAVE BOORMAN - DRUMS

RECORDED LONDON MAY/JUNE 1965
HORNS OVERDUBBED UNKNOWN DATE