

MEDIA REVIEWS

## Ry Cooder and Taj Mahal. *Get on Board*. Nonesuch/Warner Records, 2022, CD.

Varun Chandrasekhar

Washington University in St. Louis, St. Louis, MO, USA

Email: [c.varun@wustl.edu](mailto:c.varun@wustl.edu)

doi:10.1017/S1752196324000051

In 1966, blues/folk legends Taj Mahal and Ry Cooder recorded two songs together under the band name Rising Sons. Although the recordings sold poorly, this project launched both musician's careers, forever linking the two artists. Sixty-six years later, the duo reunited to record a tribute album to foundational blues artists Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry.<sup>1</sup> In an interview to promote the album, titled *Get On Board*, Mahal and Cooder sit together and warmly recount falling in love with the music of McGhee and Terry.<sup>2</sup> Essayist Lynell George is credited as an "interviewer," but her presence on the video is almost invisible. Although the video is only fifteen minutes long, one gets the sense that, even if they were alone, Mahal and Cooder would go on for hours, and the only thing who could get them to be more forthcoming about their rich personal histories with the blues is probably a few empty bottles of beer. If Mahal and Cooder's stories don't convince a listener that they have poured their lives into capturing the spirit of McGhee and Terry's work, then the interspersed cuts of Mahal and Cooder performing "Hooray, Hooray," "My Baby Done Changed the Lock on the Door," "Pick a Bale of Cotton," "I Shall Not Be Moved," and "Cornbread, Peas, Black Molasses" should remove any hints of skepticism.

Listening to the album further clarifies Mahal and Cooder's deep respect for McGhee and Terry's impeccable synergy. Although there are obvious differences between Mahal and Cooder's versions of tunes that McGhee and Terry helped turn into blues, gospel, and folk standards, the musical interactions between Mahal and Cooder are analogous to those between McGhee and Terry, especially on their version of the blues classic, "The Midnight Special," where Mahal's higher harmonies perfectly complement Cooder's lead line. Unsurprisingly, Mahal and Cooder both demonstrate their virtuosity at various points on the album. The electric guitar work on the album's opening track, "My Baby Done Changed the Locks," is phenomenal, the slow groove of "Pawn Shop Blues" cooks over Cooder's wonderful vocal performance, and the gospel energy of "Deep Sea Diver" is invigorating.

In their promotional video, Cooder discusses learning the exact picking techniques McGhee used to produce his signature guitar tune. As a guitarist, I, naturally, grabbed my ax and closely listened back to McGhee and Cooder's recordings to see how to imitate McGhee's picking style. I zoomed in on as many videos as I could find, trying to perfect the exact angles of each finger to precisely mirror the sound and the feel of such a gesture. Due to a combination of my waning guitar technique, the compressed sounds of YouTube, and the nuanced difficulty of emulating a world-class musician, I grew frustrated with the challenge of the task at hand. However, not to be deterred, I searched for other resources that would help shed light on McGhee's technique, quickly discovering Happy Traum's method book, *Guitar Styles of Brownie McGhee*.<sup>3</sup>

Traum, who was mentored by McGhee, gives pages and pages of information about the musician's personal style and the nuances of McGhee's unique approach to the instrument. The book contains a wealth of information. Although the discussion of the formal techniques of the genre is captivating, I

<sup>1</sup>*Get on Board* fits in line with the general artistic trajectory of Nonesuch Records. For more information see Dale Chapman's essay on the subject. Dale Chapman, "Private Equity Blues: Warner Music Group, Nonesuch Records, and Jazz in the Era of Financialization," *Journal of the Society for American Music* 17, no. 3 (2023): 219–42. doi: 10.1017/S1752196323000160.

<sup>2</sup>"Taj Mahal & Ry Cooder—The Making of 'GET ON BOARD,'" 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0C9WH4II-Gc>.

<sup>3</sup>Happy Traum and Brownie McGhee, *Guitar Styles of Brownie McGhee* (New York: Music Sales Corporation, 1997).

was more interested in Traum's personal relationship to the music. Like Mahal and Cooder's video, the book ties its author to a personal history of the blues. In the introduction, Traum describes the surprise of looking through the New York City phonebook, seeing McGhee's name, and being shocked to hear the low thundering voice that had previously only been familiar to him by way of records on the other end of the phone. Suddenly, Traum finds himself in McGhee's apartment, a space that is both intimately real and maintains all of the mythic properties of the blues. Between hours-long practice sessions, McGhee muses on the history of the genre, Terry occasionally walks in to play some harmonica, and McGhee's wife cooks dinner in the kitchen. Traum did not just learn the blues as a music, he *learned the blues as a way of life*.

If Traum's introduction speaks to the culture of the blues, then McGhee's preface properly historicizes the tradition that *Get On Board* is certainly a part of. McGhee recounts the journey from playing on a Prince Albert Tobacco guitar with musicians like T. T. Carter and Steve Totter, names that have all but been lost to history. McGhee is clear that these are the musicians that shaped his musical style, which is a product of the area surrounding his upbringing in Knoxville, TN. Two pages later, the mostly forgotten names of the Tennessee country symbolically come into contact with the "standard" history of the blues. By the time McGhee begins venturing out into the world, names like Paul Robeson, Pete Seeger, and Leadbelly become common recurring figures in the artist's life.

I have placed the word "standard" in quotation marks as a reminder that history, as a concept, is much more complicated than a simple recounting of previous events. As the Haitian studies scholar Michel-Rolph Trouillot notes, "In vernacular use, history means both the facts of the matter and a narrative of those facts, both 'what happened' and 'that which is said to have happened.' The first meaning places the emphasis on the sociohistorical process, the second on our knowledge of that process or on a story about that process."<sup>4</sup> Within the first definition, Mahal and Cooder are not performing history through this album. Within the second, they assuredly are. The value of this album is not just that the two musicians have obviously honed their crafts over the course of their lives, but that they desire to highlight the process by which they have come to such an understanding of the blues.

Although neither artist may say it, the marketing material suggests that both Mahal and Cooder view this project as a retrospective of their 60-plus-years long careers. Although the duo's roots, at least musically, are in the Delta blues, their careers demonstrate the genre's transformation from the backwaters of Mississippi into a cosmopolitan and global sound. Micheal Point, in his encyclopedia entry on Mahal, describes the artist as "[t]he most eclectic and international of bluesmen," adding that, "In the late 1990s Taj Mahal's recordings, beginning with *Señor Blues* in 1997, emphasized his fascination with recasting blues in new cultural contexts."<sup>5</sup> Jim Trageser opens his entry of Cooder by noting that the artist is an "[e]clectic guitarist and composer whose work has taken in everything from country/western to Cuban and Hawaiian slack key to Hollywood soundtracks."<sup>6</sup> It is a purposeful and meaningful decision for these two artists to reaffirm their commitment to the roots of their musical upbringings.

*Get On Board* hints at a more modern sound, but it is an old-school Delta blues album at heart. The recording seeps with history. The joy of listening to this album is exploring the way Cooder and Mahal are truly immersed in the tradition of the blues and how such a journey allows the listener to fully engage with the genre in all of its living glory. Given the depth of Cooder and Mahal's knowledge of the subject, viewing their journey offers the listener one realistic choice: To get on board.

**Varun Chandrasekhar** is a third year Ph.D. student in music theory at Washington University in Saint Louis. His research uses Jean-Paul Sartre's existential philosophies to contextualize discourses of "freedom" as they exist in jazz cultures. Varun applies this framework in his dissertation, "Being and Jazz: An Existential Analysis of Charles Mingus."

<sup>4</sup>Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History, 20th Anniversary Edition* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2015), 2.

<sup>5</sup>Michael Point, "Taj Mahal," in *Encyclopedia of the Blues, 2nd ed.*, ed. Edward Komara (New York, London: Routledge, 2006), 951–52.

<sup>6</sup>Jim Trageser, "Ry Cooder," in *Encyclopedia of the Blues, 2nd ed.*, ed. Edward Komara (New York, London: Routledge, 2006), 224.