



John Hammond Jr. here this month.

It Hurts Me Too John Hammond Jr

In person John Hammond is foot-stomping, guitar-crushing excitement.

A handsome figure, usually in a suit ("Junior Walker told me to get a cheap suit with a good cut," he laughs), he straddles a high stool and opens his throat to evoke the weird mysteries of the Mississippi Delta of long ago.

All the while his left foot is pounding the stage in accompaniment to the compulsive rhythms of his guitars (regular six-string, a 12-string,

his beloved National steel for slide, and a racked harmonica).

That Hammond, 43, the son of legendary record producer, talent scout and jazz critic John Hammond Sr, who died last month, is, as one might say, "good people," is icing on a rich cake.

Although Hammond's father was responsible for issuing the seminal Robert Johnson *King of the Delta Blues* albums, he didn't want his son to become a blues musician. Nevertheless hearing Johnson sparked young Hammond's lifetime devotion to the blues. "In hearing Robert's music," he says, "I was moved so deeply that I felt changed inside. Something emerged in me

and built up 'til it just had to come out."

From the early 60s Hammond has followed his own course as an interpreter of black blues. He has produced a steady stream of albums (for the Vanguard, Columbia, Atlantic, Capricorn and Rounder labels), some of which remain in print. Recommended records include *Spoonful* (an Edsel reissue of Atlantic sessions with Robbie Robertson, Bill Wyman, Duane Allman and the Muscle Shoals rhythm section), *Fattening Frogs for Snakes* (Rounder), and *Footwork* (late 70s Vanguard acoustic sessions with veteran blues pianist Roosevelt Sykes guesting). Hammond also provided the haunting music for Arthur Penn's mythical western *Little Big Man*.

I make no apology for having been a fan since I first heard the screaming electricity of *So Many Roads*, a mid-60s Vanguard album with backing from key members of Levon and the Hawks — who, through Hammond's introduction, later became Bob Dylan's Band.

Naturally, not all my friends who like the blues care for John Hammond. The casting of a "white bluesman," especially one from such a wealthy background as Hammond, will always be a stumbling block to some.

Others, while acknowledging Hammond's guitar and harmonica skills, scorn his vocals as "black-face." Most of these criticisms were ventured years ago, but Hammond has kept honing his style, recording some songs ('I Wish You Would,' 'Who Do You Love?') several times over the years.

There was a special night at Melbourne's Troubadour nearly two years ago when a soon-going-home Hammond played away from his core repertoire, dipping into such songs as 'Chattanooga Choo Choo,' 'Junco Partner' and Chuck Willis's 'It's Too Late' with an aching slide part. The memory lingers.

For that and more I shall be seeing John Hammond again.

Ken Williams

John Hammond Sr 1910 - 1987

John Hammond Sr, who died in his New York apartment last month aged 77, had the best ears in the music business.

A talent scout and producer since the 30s, he discovered and nurtured many of the most important musicians of the 20th Century. Billie Holiday, Count Basie, Aretha Franklin, Bob Dylan and Bruce Springsteen all owe the beginnings of their careers to Hammond.

He was also a battler against racial discrimination, in American society, and in music. It was Hammond who encouraged Benny Goodman to include black musicians in his band, a courageous step in the segregated early 30s.

In 1938 Hammond organised the landmark "From Spirituals to Swing" concerts at Carnegie Hall that brought jazz — and black talent — to a formal concert stage. The bill was like a history of black American music. Among those that appeared were Sister Rosetta Tharp, James P Johnson, Big Joe Turner, Sidney Bechet, the Count Basie band, Sonny Terry, pianists Albert Ammons and Meade Lux Lewis (rescued from a Chicago car wash; his performance reawakened interest in boogie woogie), and Big Bill Broonzy.

Hammond had wanted Robert Johnson to appear at the concerts, considering him the greatest bluesman of the time, but the invitation arrived too late: Johnson had been killed by his girlfriend several months earlier.

It's extraordinary that the ear that detected the potential in Count Basie, Billie Holiday, and Aretha Franklin could also hear the voices of the future in Bob Dylan and Bruce Springsteen. Without Hammond, it is likely that CBS Records



The late John Hammond Sr.

would never have become a major label of contemporary music. Aretha Franklin however, didn't peak until after she had left CBS, where her producers wanted her to be a "black Barbra Streisand."

"The musical misuse and eventual loss of Aretha as a recording artist disturbed me greatly," said Hammond, "not least because her career since leaving Columbia has fulfilled every confidence I had in her. She had every musicianly quality I thought she had. All she needed was to hold to her roots in the church."

Dylan was nicknamed by CBS staff "Hammond's folly." "I think it was his air of being willing to take on the world that grabbed me," said Hammond. "It was bold, it was witty, and it was very attractive. And I confess he twanged a responsive chord in the young part of me which shared his ambitions to change the world."

Although Hammond had been born a member of the wealthy Vanderbilt family, he was always driven by a sense of social and political justice. From improving pressing plant conditions, unionising offices, breaking down Army segregation, to helping musicians down

on their luck, there are many examples of Hammond's sense of human rights and generosity.

"Of course," wrote jazz critic Leonard Feather, "anyone as opinionated as John was bound to make enemies. Because of his racial attitudes, he was called a communist, though he believed staunchly in integration while the American Communist Party at that time wanted a separate 49th state for blacks to be gerrymandered out of deep South territory ... Some white musicians resented his championship of equality. John once told me, with a touch of pride, that the white cornetist Red Nichols had dismissed him as a 'nigger lover'." The rightwing John Birch Society once waged a smear campaign against Hammond.

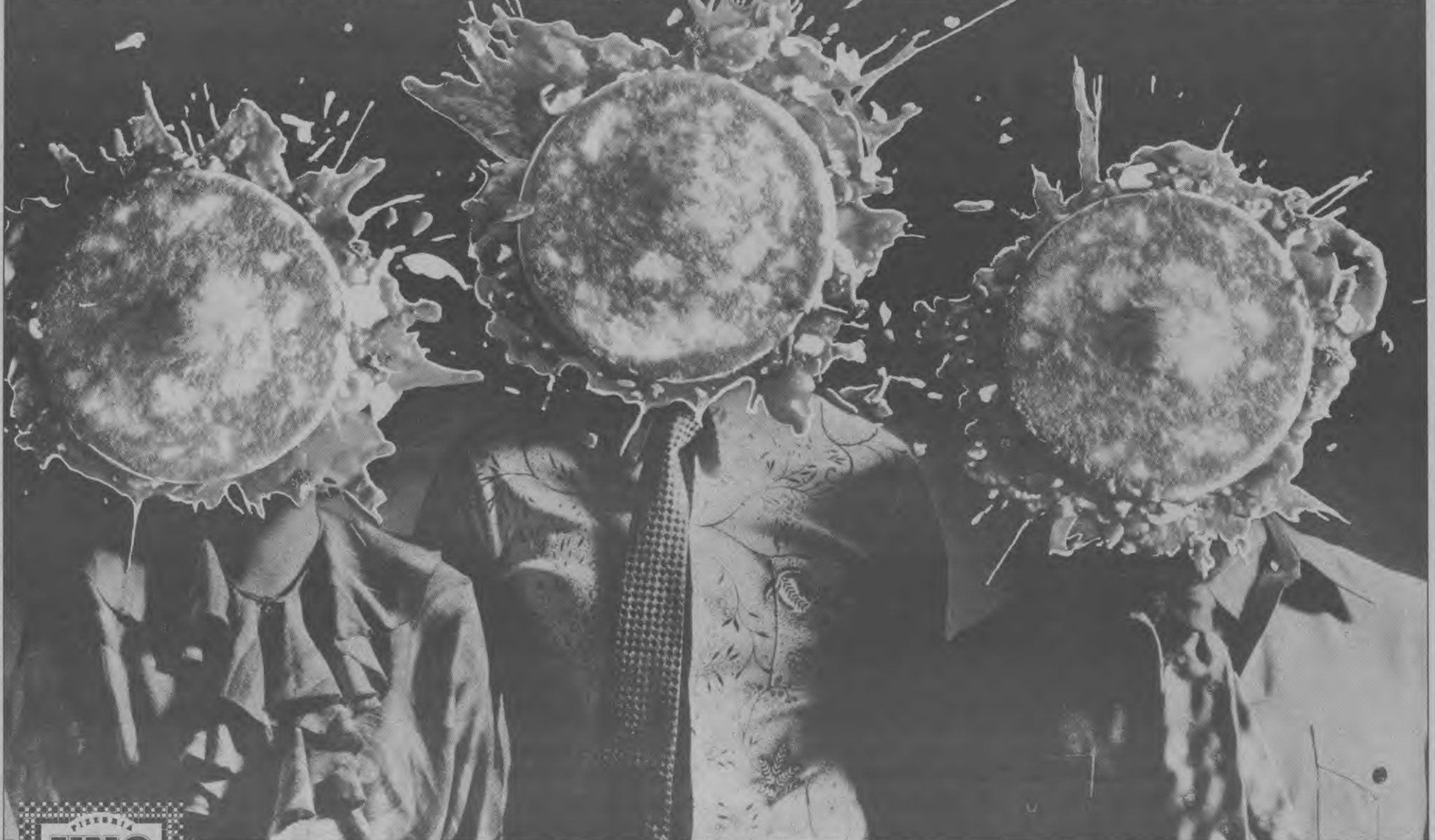
During the time when Pete Seeger was blacklisted, Hammond signed him to Columbia. Among the others to benefit from his help were the Four Tops, Leonard Cohen and George Benson, all of whom he signed, jazzers Lionel Hampton and Charlie Christian, plus blues singers Bessie Smith and Alberta Hunter. But among Hammond's proudest discoveries was Billie Holiday; he was playing 'All of Me' when he died.

Chris Bourke

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