

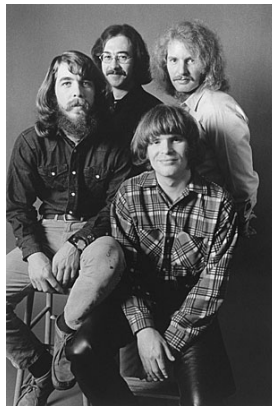
“Fortunate Son”--Creedence Clearwater Revival (1969)

Added to National Registry: 2014

Essay by Hank Bordowitz (guest essay)*



“Willy and the Poor Boys” LP



Creedence Clearwater Revival



“Fortunate Son” 45 sleeve

Creedence Clearwater Revival recorded many great songs with often ambiguous meanings, fictitious locations, or unusual characters--it was rarely totally clear what, if anything, they were actually about. From the mythical Mississippi of “Proud Mary” to the apocalyptic “Bad Moon Rising,” from “the happy creatures dancing on the lawn” in “Looking Out My Back Door” to the street corner “Sgt. Pepper” of “Willie and the Poor Boys,” there were few love songs, only a couple of protest songs. John Fogerty, the band’s primary songwriter, created works that were often Faulknerian set pieces as opposed to Hemmingwayesque stories (c.f. Billy Joel). Like Elvis before them, CCR forged R&B and country into a unique alloy. Their strength was more often what they evoked than what they actually said.

“Fortunate Son” was not like that. It went straight into attack mode, one of the greatest class-consciousness songs to ever become a hit record. Recorded during the heart of the Vietnam War, it was not about the war per se. It was more about who went to fight in the days before the Volunteer Army, when any 18-year-old’s number could come up in the draft. Fogerty’s and CCR drummer Doug Clifford’s numbers did, in fact, come up and both managed to land in the Reserves. Many of their friends were not so fortunate. Dave Marsh caught the drift in his five star review of the “Willie and the Poor Boys” album in “Rolling Stone,” calling the song “a stab at the privileged that only kids from the wrong side of the ultra-hip San Francisco Bay area could have felt so sharply.” Clifford called the song “a political statement.” John felt he wrote “a confrontation between me and Richard Nixon.... Not a positive image of the people who live up on the hill, with their big cars. People I don’t respect.”

Set to some of the most raging rock Creedence ever recorded, the song sounds deceptively simple. The chorus is I, IV, V rock at its finest, while the verse inverts the same chords (IV, V, I). John practically spits out the words “It ain’t me, it ain’t me, I ain’t no fortunate one.” The actual title of the song is not in the record’s lyrics, though it does appear at the very end of the live ending to the song, an ending Fogerty still uses.

As Marsh also noted, CCR were from the “wrong side” of the Bay Area, the East Bay, the Oakland side of the Bay. All of the members came from El Cerrito, once described by Jeff Fogerty, the son of the band’s late rhythm guitarist Tom Fogerty, as “the most un-hip place to be in the Bay area. It’s this little, small, sleepy town....”

All of the members of CCR grew up in that “sleepy” suburb of Berkley, Oakland and San Francisco. Stu Cook’s father was an attorney. Doug Clifford’s dad was a machinist and his mother, a cosmetician. Tom and John were two of five brothers. Their father left home about the time that John was eight. From there on, his mother, a special education teacher, had to support her brood. John’s bedroom was in the basement of their home.

Like his transoceanic peers, the Beatles, he was inspired by rhythm and blues. At El Cerrito Junior High, he met two kindred spirits, pianist (and soon-to-be bassist) Stu Cook and drummer Doug Clifford. The trio worked in a variety of bands, mostly playing instrumentals. Big brother Tom was a fairly well-known local singer who decided to go into the studio with his little brother’s band. This group went through several permutations, signing with Fantasy, a local independent record label that had had a hit with Vince Guaraldi’s “Cast Your Fate to the Wind.” The company was mostly known for jazz records, or comedy albums by Lenny Bruce, however.

By the time the band recorded “Fortunate Son” for their fourth album, “Willie and the Poor Boys,” the band had already released three best-selling albums and enjoyed four hit singles—all in little over a year. “Fortunate Son” was one of several two-sided singles Creedence released over their short, meteoric career. “Son” was released as the B-side of the single “Down on the Corner” in November of 1969, but found an audience first, charting in the national top 40 before the A-side joined it in the top ten at the end of the month.

Though not one of their most covered songs (“Proud Mary” has had hundreds of remakes, for example), “Fortunate Son” has had some notable versions done by Pearl Jam and U2, who like to do the song live. Most notable was not so much a cover as a duet with the Foo Fighters on Fogerty’s 2013 album of duets and collaborations “Wrote a Song For Everyone.” The track became an integral part of Dave Grohl’s documentary film “Sound City.”

Ironically, while the Library of Congress has seen fit to add the song to the National Recording Registry, a high honor indeed, Fogerty says that it is the CCR recording he would most have preferred to perform better. “I always thought my singing was a little lacking,” Fogerty says. “What happened was, I went in to do two songs that day. The first one was ‘Down on the Corner.’ I sang all of the background parts, and then sang the lead. Then, with the time we had left at that session, I said: ‘OK, let ‘er rip!’ and I sang the lead on ‘Fortunate Son.’ I’ve just always thought that I maybe should have started with that one that day.”

Still, it sounds pretty good to us.

Hank Bordowitz is the author of 10 books including “Bad Moon Rising, The Unauthorized History of Creedence Clearwater Revival” (1998, 2007), “Turning Points in Rock and Roll” (2004), and “Led Zeppelin on Led Zeppelin” (2014). He is on the editorial board of “The Journal of Rock Music Studies,” and was a major contributor to “Gale’s Biographical

Dictionary of Musicians.” He has edited over a dozen music magazines and websites. Currently, Bordowitz teaches music and writing at Bergen Community College.

* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.