



Paradise and Lunch

180g SA CD

Ry Cooder

Speakers Corner/Reprise MS 2179
Mobile Fidelity UDSACD 2179

During the 1960s, Ry Cooder worked as a session musician, playing mostly slide guitar, on numerous classic LPs, including the Stones' *Let It Bleed* and *Sticky Fingers* and Randy Newman's *12 Songs*. For most musicians, this would be a career-capping achievement, but Cooder, in his early twenties, was just getting started. His eclectic tastes have been rolled out to music lovers for over four decades since that time. His three dozen albums cover the blues, pop, Tex-Mex, R&B, and just about any other popular genre you can think of.

Paradise and Lunch, one of his earliest solo albums, was recorded in Los Angeles using a core of that city's best session players, including jazz players like Plas Johnson on alto, Red Callender on bass, and Milt Holland on drums and percussion. Jim Keltner, one of the greatest session players of all time, became Cooder's go-to drummer. Earl Hines plays piano on one track. Cooder used a handful of outstanding backup singers, and employed a horn section and string section on some tunes. Traditional folk and gospel tunes, blues standards, and pop are melded into a cohesive whole. Not only is the song list cohesive, meaning that the disparate styles flow together seamlessly, but the variety of styles works to maintain interest. There is not a single moment

in this album that does not hold your attention: it just won't let it go!

Perhaps the catchiest earworm is the call and response vocals of 'Jesus On The Mainline', a Fred McDowell version of a traditional song that has been covered by everyone from Randy Travis to Aerosmith. Then there are the gorgeous harmonies and the inspired guitar work throughout. As much as I like Cooder's soundtrack to the movie *Paris, Texas* for its moodiness and his melding of Eastern and Western music in *A Meeting by the River*, neither quite scales the height of this masterpiece. Cooder doesn't just produce musically satisfying records, however, he also consistently delivers amazing sound. I once found myself running through the blues bins at a favourite LP record store next to Cooder, and a brief chat with him confirmed just how important the sound of his LP is for him.

Any number of his albums belong on anyone's disc list, and the Warner Music Group seems to be opening up the Cooder catalogue, with Mobile Fidelity and Speakers Corner releasing several titles. In the case of *Paradise*, both companies secured rights to the title, with Speaker's Corner leading off with vinyl and MoFi beginning with its hybrid SACD and promising vinyl later. Lee Herschberg, who started recording for Reprise in the 1960s shortly after its inception, and then went on to head the recording department for Reprise/Warner Brothers, recorded the sessions. Until now, the original issue of the LP sounded pretty outstanding, perhaps

not quite the equal of Cooder's *Jazz*, but not that far off. Speakers Corner had the original tapes remastered by Kevin Gray in California and the improvement is significant. Everything is fleshed out and three-dimensional, making the original seem threadbare.

The bass digs in deeper and cleaner on the reissue—listen to the bass guitar on 'If Walls Could Talk' and it's almost as though it was missing in the original. In fact, the first thing you notice playing the Speakers Corner next to an original is the kind of bass you feel in your body more than hear, which is abundant in the reissue and largely missing in the original. In addition to adding back the rolled-off bass, Kevin Gray's new mastering turns this into a record to die for, and I would be surprised not to see it spinning in a few rooms at upcoming shows.

Mobile Fidelity's new hybrid SACD shares most of the improvements rolled out by Speakers Corner, missing only the last ounce of air offered by the all-analogue version. When MoFi's vinyl version appears, I expect it will sound very much the equal of the Speakers Corner version. For engaging music that has aged well with outstanding sound, this deserves the highest recommendation for audio bliss whether you are spinning vinyl or CD. A copy should be sent to every recording studio with a challenge to render recordings of equal quality. **DD**

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