

The Audio Beat

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Ry Cooder • *Ry Cooder*

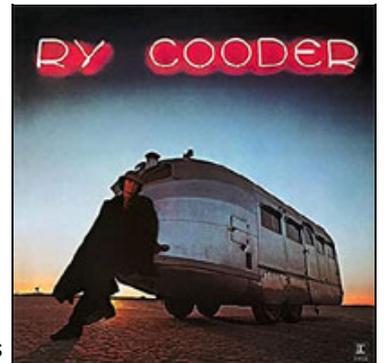
Reprise/[Speakers Corner](#) RS402
180-gram LP
1970/2021

Music
Sound

by [Vance Hiner](#) | March 15, 2022

It's safe to say that millions of people around the world have been exposed to the work of guitar legend Ry Cooder, but only a fraction of them actually know the man's name. Whether it's his fretwork on soundtracks for films like *Paris, Texas*, *Crossroads* and *Buena Vista Social Club* or his dozens of guest appearances on early albums by the likes of Neil Young, the Rolling Stones, Randy Newman and Van Morrison, Cooder has played a major role in keeping traditional folk and blues sounds alive.

Even though he was only 22 years old when this eponymous album debuted in 1970, Cooder was already a seasoned hand, having been mentored by Taj Mahal and battle-tested by the eccentric demands of Don Van Vliet in an early iteration of the Captain Beefheart Magic Band. So, by the time Reprise signed him, Cooder was itching for a chance to helm his own project. The result is an album that reflects a precocious young musician's kinetic energy and also documents his search for a vocal style he could call his own. Cooder's guitar work is dazzling, but his singing can be a challenge for listeners less patient with offbeat delivery. Fans of Woody Guthrie and 1920s-era blues recordings will likely respect Cooder's intentions, while those who long for perfect pitch will be disappointed.



Setting those provisos aside, Cooder's debut is an innovative and heartfelt rendering of early-to-mid-20th-century American music. Side one starts with an interesting rearrangement of the 1965 Tommy Tucker single "Alimony." Cooder reimagines this rock 'n' blues number as a New Orleans-flavored march replete with Professor Longhair syncopation and a gospel choir. Creative touches like this are what have kept Cooder's fans so loyal during his more than five decades in the business. By contrast, his decision to turn Van Dyke Parks loose, resulting in an orchestral arrangement of the very strange novelty number "One Meat Ball," must have driven chart-hungry record executives of the era crazy. Fortunately, the album also contains gems like Cooder's own "Available Space" and Blind Blake's "Police Dog Blues," where Cooder's guitar slinging is on full display.

It's worth noting here that the production team assembled for this record helps explain why it's still a rewarding listen even when the material falters a bit. Producer Lenny Waronker's fingerprints can be found on many of the very best Warner/Reprise releases during the 1960s and '70s. If you like the sound quality of Randy Newman, Joni Mitchell and Neil Young recordings, Waronker deserves at least some of the credit. Helming the control board on these sessions is none other than Lee Herschberg, who has one of the most prolific and impressive resumes in the field, including hundreds (no exaggeration) of the very best-sounding albums of the past fifty years.

The best news about this reissue is how much better it sounds compared to the Tidal MQA and Qobuz 16-bit/44.1kHz streams I auditioned. Kevin Gray's remastering and the dead-quiet Pallas pressing convey more of the chest and throat of Cooder's vocals, whereas the digital streams render his voice even reedier than it already is. Fortunately, this all-analog Speakers Corner release takes the digital edge off Cooder's steely slide-guitar licks. Drums on the remaster also have additional weight, but the real payoff comes on Cooder's original compositions. The richness and depth of his acoustic-guitar tones can be better appreciated, as individual notes hang in the air, resonating throughout the room much like they would during a live performance. The sense of presence on these cuts is off the charts. While I didn't have access to an original LP to compare, the Speakers Corner version is a good bet for fans who want a clean and ruler-flat pressing of this fine Americana recording. 🎧