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THE MAYER OF ATLANTA

by Kevin Raub

John Mayer's status in his adopted hometown has afforded him plenty of time to enjoy the finer things, like hybrid sushi dinners with Elton John. But the real reason he keeps coming back? People in Atlanta know that escalators are for chilling out.



Folk-pop wonder boy John Mayer has just bitten his lip between bites of tortilla soup at a small and trendy Mexican café. That in itself isn't all that remarkable — we've all been there. It's just that Mayer gets all up in arms over it. "I just bit my lip good," he announces. "This is now going to set off a vicious cycle of continual biting. This means I will end up chewing like this [makes funny sideways chewing face]. That was great. Thanks, John!" Well, it's a good thing he didn't choke.

Actually, choking is not part of Mayer's routine thus far. Intensive word of mouth — much of it on the Internet — eventually led the record-buying public to his whimsical major label debut in 2001, *Room for Squares*. The album spawned the hits "No Such Thing," "Why Georgia," and "Your Body is a Wonderland." The Dave Matthews comparisons were swift and unrelenting, but Mayer soldiered on. His second album, 2003's *Heavier Things*, gave us the smash hit "Daughters," proved Mayer was no chat-room fluke, and bridged the sonic generation gap between introspective suburban teenagers and overworked soccer moms. John Mayer had become a household name.

But before his unconventional (at the time) career climb gave hope to anyone with a computer, a guitar, and a MySpace username, Mayer sort of tried to take a more predictable route to musical stardom: He enrolled in Boston's Berklee College of Music. Needless to say, it didn't take. So Mayer ditched his education, packed up his guitars and songbooks, and headed south to Atlanta with a fellow classmate. It was an unknown land for this Connecticut native, but this time, something did catch hold.

Author

KEVIN RAUB is a Los Angeles-based travel and entertainment journalist. His work has appeared in *Travel+Leisure*, the *New York Post*, *FHM*, and *Stuff*, among other publications.

"I'm always most inspired when it comes down to me," he explains. "Put me in a room, and tell me I can leave but first I have to put this thing together out of 100 pieces, and I'll stay there and do it. If I know there's a way, I'll do it. Atlanta was the first time I discovered there was a way to do it."

Mayer spent four years playing the starving-musician role, toiling away in the city's vibrant live-music culture, taking in all this Southern capital had to offer both on- and offstage. Now, on the eve of his third major-label effort, *Continuum*, Mayer remembers his adopted hometown as a dizzying array of diverse cultures, all living in coexistent equilibrium. "Atlanta is one game board with a dozen different games being played on it at the same time, and no two pieces hit each other. That's what's so cool about it. Honest to God. Somehow or another, it all completes itself."

Or maybe that's just how he remembers Waffle House (more on that later). Either way, Atlanta was very good to John Mayer, so now it's his turn to give back to the people who knew him before every member of your family did.

What brought you to Atlanta in the first place? I had made a friend who was from Atlanta. We kind of became a singer-songwriter duo at Berklee and both decided to withdraw, the plan being I would live with him in Atlanta and start a life and career down there. We had a falling-out, but I still ended up down there. I was far enough along into that lineage that there was nowhere else to go but back home into the world of "I told you so" at my parents' house. At the same time, I had had a real connection with the city, and I knew I wasn't done figuring that place out, so I stayed there.

What made you connect to it? I was connecting with the unbelievable open-mindedness and friendliness — it sounds like a cliché, but it's a good cliché to have. For the first time in my life, I was playing shows at venues and making friends with people who were there. Where I was from in Connecticut, as a musical springboard, there's nothing. In Atlanta, people would just go out and get a beer and whatever was on was on. They would actively participate in watching shows. If somebody's girlfriend dragged him or her out to go see a show and they liked it, they were hooked. They were like, "See ya next week." I'd never seen anything like it.

What is your earliest memory of the city? Shawn Mullins. I can't think of Atlanta without thinking of Shawn Mullins. He was such a huge inspiration for me. The day I landed in Atlanta, the radio was playing his song "Lullaby" on a show called "Locals Only" on [radio station] 99X. Now, you are coming down to Atlanta to play music for a living, and you hear this guy with that song, and it's *local*? You want to pack up and go — leave before your boxes get there. From the very get-go, it was a challenge. Then, once I met him, I learned so much about how to be cool from him.

Like what? People who get famous in Atlanta are held to a certain standard of genuineness by their friends and fans. I don't know anyone in Atlanta who has lost their head if, when they became successful, they stayed in Atlanta. Once you leave Atlanta, everybody assumes you've lost your mind. Everyone assumes you have given up your heart. I could sell millions of records, and as long as I live in Atlanta, there's no dissent. If

you go to New York, all the local musicians think you are a traitor. There's a little bit of a *Shawshank Redemption*-type thing with the local musicians in Atlanta. There is such a support. Even when there are people who are 10 times better than you, you still buddy up with them and find out how they got where they're at. There's better communication among artists there than anywhere else.

Atlanta has a long tradition of attracting celebrities as well – Elton John, Diddy, Whitney Houston, you. Why do you think that is?

Because it has no metahipster awareness of itself. It's a very simple approach to living your life. For instance, if you're at Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport, and you're taking the escalator up to the gate ... the dog-eat-dog world knows that the left side is for walking up and the right side is for chilling. But in Atlanta, the left side is for chilling out and the right side is for chilling out.

Besides the escalators, where was your favorite place to chill out?

It's funny, because I didn't spend a lot of time there when I was there. But knowing who I am now, I would probably hang out in Little Five Points more. The only time I was in Little Five Points was when I was going to see a show at Variety Playhouse or doing my best imitation of a good first date. That was about it. I was also 21 when I first got there, so I never really considered myself a part of the culture. The combination of my age and how much I was into playing music and getting that going, I never really became a part of the recreational culture of Atlanta. Now I seize that in my life, and I would be hanging out in Little Five Points.

Where were you hanging out? What I most remember about Atlanta, which is still very special to me, is the drive I would do at least three times a week, from Duluth to Decatur to go to Eddie's Attic to play a show. I was on the standby list with Eddie; if somebody had car trouble in Chattanooga, Eddie would call me and say, "Wanna play for a half hour? An hour?" There was always this mood of complete excitement and complete vitality, getting into the car and preparing myself to go play. It was a very long drive down Clairmont Road to get to Eddie's Attic — you go straight for four miles past a bunch of lights.

When you needed new guitar strings or something, where did you shop? Atlanta should be proud of its malls. Lenox Square and Phipps Plaza together are probably the best mall in the country. A touring musician is a mall aficionado. As a touring musician, I rate malls. There are very hard-and-fast rules. If a mall has a Payless, it can be no greater than a four. If it has a giant gumball machine, no better than a six. If a mall has an Apple store, you have a great shot at having a great mall. Lenox is fascinating because it's laid out like its own microcosmic city. Then you have Phipps, which is even more highfalutin. You need a credit check just to get into it. It's carpeted! [It might be] the only mall in America with a carpeted staircase in the center, as if to say, "We're available for weddings."

What was your favorite spot to turn up for an impromptu jam session? For me, it was Eddie's Attic. But I approached Eddie's differently. I didn't approach it as an acoustic-folk place, but as a pop place with a great room where people were focusing on good playing. I didn't play many places in Atlanta, so Eddie's was my spot. That's more my style anyway: Work one place until the end.

You're on a first date: What restaurant would you choose? I think I went on a couple of dates in Atlanta. There is Harry and Sons, which has great Asian food and sushi. Really laid-back. And then there's Café Intermezzo. It's just Candyland. They have 30 or 40 different kinds of cakes at any given time. And they have a great outdoor patio. Love it. There's also a Thai place called Surin, right next to Dark Horse Tavern & Grill in Virginia Highlands. That's a killer restaurant. Best Thai food in Atlanta.

Well, since you were a struggling musician at the time, did you have a favorite spot to eat on the cheap? Fellini's Pizza! Fellini's is more my style. But there is more than one Fellini's. I like the one on Peachtree Road. It's open late — that's great for a musician — and it's cheap.

Where did you head when you wanted down-home Southern food? The Flying Biscuit. They have these amazing giant biscuits and bacon.

How did you feel about the Waffle House phenomenon? Love it! Martin Luther King had a dream, and I think Waffle House was in it. It's a supernova of cultures — the most diverse room in all of Atlanta at any given moment is a Waffle House. It's where, at the end of the night, different cultures, viewpoints, and appetites all come together to enjoy the same lowest-common-denominator meal. The first night I ever came to Atlanta, I was taken to a Waffle House. As long as you are in the Southeast — this is great for touring — you can walk into a Waffle House and feel right at home. They are all the same! So if I'm traveling to Columbus, Georgia, or Chattanooga, I can walk into a Waffle House and feel like at least I'm in the Southeast. I propose that as a bumper sticker: "At least I'm in the Southeast."

Where do you splurge when you swing through Atlanta nowadays? Bluepointe. Good place to eat. I went with Elton John one time and had a blast. It's like a sushi hybrid. It's great.

Tell me an Atlanta secret. If somebody cuts you off in Atlanta, they didn't mean to. They weren't looking. If somebody cuts you off in New York, they have somewhere to get before you.

He Said...

John Mayer's Atlanta wonderland

DINING

Bluepointe, Asian-Fusion, moderate, (404) 237-9070

Café Intermezzo, dessert/coffee, inexpensive to moderate, (404) 355-0411

Fellini's Pizza, Italian, inexpensive, (404) 266-0082

Flying Biscuit, Southern, inexpensive, (404) 687-8888

Harry and Sons, Japanese/Thai, inexpensive to moderate, (404) 873-2009

Surin of Thailand, Thai, inexpensive to moderate, (404) 892-7789

Waffle House, American, inexpensive, (877) 992-3353

SHOPPING

Lenox Square, (404) 233-6767

Phipps Plaza, (404) 262-0992

ATTRACTIONS

Eddie's Attic, (404) 377-4976

Little Five Points, www.l5p.com

Variety Playhouse, (404) 524-7354

We Said...Our Atlanta wonderland

LODGING

The Glenn Hotel, moderate, (404) 521-2250. No city needed a boutique hotel more than Atlanta, and it finally arrived early this year in the form of the Glenn, located smack downtown, next to CNN Center. The hotel bills itself as a mix of South Beach sophistication and Southern charm.

W Atlanta, expensive, (770) 396-6800. Before the Glenn, this was Atlanta's only true design hotel. Its location out in Perimeter Center isn't ideal for downtown business, but Buckhead and Virginia Highlands are just a short cab ride away. It's worth it for the W's signature beds alone.

Westin Buckhead, expensive, (404) 365-0065. You can't beat the location of the Westin Buckhead (formerly the Swissôtel) in the heart of the action on Peachtree Road in Buckhead. You can hit Lenox Square and Phipps Plaza with a rock from the sleek, nearly-all-glass lobby, but step outside before you try it.

DINING

Buckhead Diner, American, moderate, (404) 262-3336. Modeled after the famous Fog City Diner in San Francisco, this upscale dining destination serves up low-end cuisine with a high-end punch. The homemade potato chips with warm Maytag blue cheese have been on the menu forever — there's a reason for that.

Dante's Down the Hatch, fondue, expensive, (404) 266-1600. This Atlanta institution has the best fondue you will ever have served up in a ship surrounded by a moat full of live alligators. Dante himself is one of the city's most legendary characters. A meal not to be missed.

Two Urban Licks, New American, moderate, (404) 522-4622. With its soaring 14-foot, wood-pit rotisserie tower in the middle of the dining area and live blues Wednesday through Saturday, there's always something to see at Two. But, really, it's about chef Scott Serpas's updated American

staples, like pan-roasted duck with butternut squash or bronzed scallops with smoked Gouda grits.

Watershed, New Southern, moderate, (404) 378-4900. Indigo Girl Emily Saliers knows a thing or two beyond writing a decent hook: This restaurant and wine retailer, which she co-owns, does comfort food, like Southern fried chicken, that will have your stomach asking for an encore.

ATTRACTIONS

Atlanta Cyclorama & Civil War Museum, (404) 624-1071. The Cyclorama is one gigantic circular painting depicting the events of the Civil War. Sure, it's a bit cheesy, but the art itself is amazing. The Civil War bookstore here is unrivaled.

High Museum of Art, (404) 733-4444. Atlanta's newly expanded High Museum, which debuted this past November, is one of the premier museums in North America — so much so that the Musée du Louvre in Paris has decided to loan hundreds of its works through 2009. Louvre Atlanta opens in October.

Piedmont Park, www.piedmontpark.org. Atlanta's premier inner-city park is a real beauty. On nice days, its expansive lawn is destination No. 1 for the Beautiful People. Atlanta's modern midtown skyline is a gorgeous backdrop.

World of Coca-Cola, (404) 676-5151. Coca-Cola practically comes out of the faucets in Atlanta, and its fascinating history is laid out here in an interactive museum that rivals any for mindless fun. Though a new, improved one is being built in Centennial Olympic Park, this one is still worth a visit until then. The best part? The International Lounge, where more than 20 brands of Coke products from around the world can be sampled. Drink yourself into a sickly-sweet stupor.

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