



A Pirate Looks at 44

As 'Rolling Stone' celebrated its 20th anniversary, Keith took time to reflect on a rock & roll life well-lived

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YOU'VE BEEN PLAYING with the Rolling Stones for a quarter of a century now. Do you think rock & roll has as intense an effect on kids today as it did when you were, say, 15?

No, I don't see how it's possible, really. I mean, when I was 15, rock & roll was a brand-new thing, and we were very conscious that we were in, like, a new era. Totally. It was almost like A.D. and B.C., and 1956 was year one, you know? The world was black-and-white, and then suddenly it went into living color. Suddenly there was a reason to be around, besides just knowing you were gonna have to work and draggin' your ass to school every day. Suddenly everything went zoom – glorious Technicolor. It was an international explosion, man. Just a few little goddamn records by some guys in Memphis and Macon and places like that, but they really did have an effect. It's reshaped the way people think. I mean, goddamn it, now you've got rock & roll concerts in Moscow. 'Cause you can't stop that shit. You can stop anything else. You can build a wall to stop people, but, eventually, the music will cross that wall. That's the beautiful thing about music – there's no defense against it. Look at Joshua and fuckin' Jericho – made mincemeat of that joint. A few trumpets, you know?

Do you think you're a much different person than you were 20 years ago?

Yeah, obviously. It's not that I feel that different. I've been through 20 years of... I mean, my years are as long as anybody else's. I mean, like, 20 years ago, let me think... In '67, I was just learnin' how to get busted [laughs]. I was taking acid and getting busted. Researching police cells, you know?

Do you think that the Sixties changed things in significant ways?

Well, we all thought so at the time – at least the guys of my age, doin' what we were doin'. It did look like there was a possibility of it. But I'm sure all the guys that had to go and fight in the Second World War thought the Forties were gonna do that, and so did the guys in 1917, you know? It's a watershed in everybody's life, that point in your late teens or early twenties where you think you really know everything much more than everybody else. Where everybody else is either an old fart or a kid, and you're the only one who's got the balls to do anything, you know? But you'll find out, sucker [laughs].

I mean, for me, the beginning of the Sixties was when I got to be 18 and 19, so in a way, it was a magical time, because I actually managed to turn my little juvenile fantasies into a way of life. And I thought that would be impossible – that that was something that happened to stars. Even when we got our first record out, we all looked at each other with a little bit of dismay, you know? Because there was no precedent at that time; nobody lasted. You shot up there, and you were gone. There was

no possible way you could believe that it was gonna last for anything more than another two years.

But, of course, by the time a year or two had gone by, we realized that there was a whole different thing in the works, and we forgot about that. Because it became obvious that you could expand this thing. And what made that possible was that we managed to export it – which was the most blinding thing to any musician at that point. I mean, before that, you had to be the biggest dreamer in the world to think that you could export this stuff to America, you know?

Were you surprised by the reception you received in the States when you came over for your first tour?

Yeah, it was really weird. Because this is such a huge country, right? And you'd go into, like, New York or L.A., and it'd be "Wow!" Blown away, you know? And then you'd go off on a three-week slide through the South and the Midwest, and it would be like, "What the fuck is that?" You know? "It's a buncha chicks!" And so you'd constantly be goin' through this thing of, like, one minute this sort of fanatical acclaim, and the next minute, you'd go a few hundred miles and it'd be, like, "Scumbags!" You'd be lower than the town bum – at least they knew him.

But the Stones prevailed in the end. What's kept you going all this time?

Well, mainly, I wouldn't know what else to do. I'm a lazy son of a bitch, you know? I mean, I can be. But to me, that's the hardest work of all, bein' lazy. I mean, in a way, I enjoy it, lyin' around doin' nothing. But you can't just make a profession out of laziness – you have to work really hard at it, you know? It's easier to do some great music, to click off of a few other guys and get like "Yeah! Yeah! Yeah!" You may go 18 hours without even takin' a pee, it's just such tremendous fun.

Do you ever go back and listen to the Stones' old albums?

Well, funnily enough, this year I've listened to them more than ever, because they all came out on CD. That was the first time I listened to a whole series of Stones stuff for a long time.

Which of the albums emerged as your favorites?

Well, the ones that impressed me were the ones I always thought were superior – *Beggars Banquet*, *Let It Bleed*. And *Sticky Fingers*. And *Exile*. There's so much stuff on *Exile* that even I'm surprised. I can't even remember all of it: "Oh, yeah. Did I write that?" I quite liked *Black and Blue*. Some of that quite surprised me, especially as it was cut while we were auditioning guitar players [laughs].

What was your favorite edition of the Stones – with Brian Jones, Mick Taylor or Ronnie Wood?

The most fun is Ronnie. He's also the most open. However, I think some of our best work was probably with Mick Taylor. Ronnie's incredibly underrated in a lot of ways. He's got a lot more to him than you think, 'cause he's a very sort of superficially flippant character. But he's got a lot more depth to him than most people think. I love his enthusiasm. And he's been with the Stones longer than any of the others.

How do you look upon some of the guitar players who were your peers – Eric Clapton, Jimi Hendrix, Jimmy Page?

Eric is a lovely player. Jimi, I would have loved to have heard what he was just startin' off to do. I saw him a few weeks or months before he died, and he was very eager to lay down some new stuff. He wanted to put the whole psychedelic thing behind him. He was almost embarrassed by some of his recorded work.

Did he play you any new material?

No. He was just talking about it, and he was in the middle of putting a band together when he kicked it. If you could have hung on for another year, Jimi... I would have loved to have heard it, man.

Continental Drift

Richards with Bill Wyman and Brian Jones in 1967



Did you ever get to jam with him?

Dressing rooms a couple of times, just piddling about. In those days, everybody was always on the road, and you'd sit around maybe a couple of evenings here and there, and that would be it. And also you'd be out of it, you know? "I gotta call my dealer..."

Going back to the Sixties again, were you ever seduced by "flower power" and all that?

Personally, no. I mean, you paid a fair amount of lip service to it – peer pressure, et cetera. But I am quite proud that I never did go and kiss the maharishi's goddamn feet, you know?

Does it all seem pretty funny to you now?

Absolutely. I mean, it was like theater of the ridiculous. If it hadn't been promoted so hard – like, by the Beatles, especially – maybe it wouldn't have reached quite the insane proportions that it got to. The basic drive behind it, I suppose, one had to like. But the amount of people that were suckered into it...

Like "All you need is love"?

Yeah – try livin' off of it.

And yet the Stones had their hippie-trippy moment, too – with "Their Satanic Majesties Request." Was that really nothing more than a response to the Beatles' "Sgt. Pepper"?

“You paid lip service to flower power, but I'm quite proud I never did kiss the maharishi's goddamn feet.”

Really, yes. That was the bowing to the peer pressure. Suddenly, everybody was stoned – all of us got this new stuff called LSD, man. And the Beatles were singin' about it, and Mick was goin' off to see the maharishi, and I'm thinkin', "Uhhh, I ain't too sure about this shit."

Back then, the Stones and the Beatles were always portrayed as polar opposites – they were the good guys, you were the bad guys. Was the reality ever anything like that?

No. We probably felt more of a kinship, because we were basically the same age, we liked basically the same kind of music, and we wanted to do what we were doin'. There probably weren't more than a few other groups of guys that had more in common, you know? There was a healthy competition, but it was civilized. I guess from the outside, it seemed like they were the fresh-faced fab moptops, and we were the other end of the spectrum. But they were just as filthy as we were. I mean, Brian Jones used to wash his hair three times a day, man, you know?

One of the great rallying cries of the Sixties was "Sex and drugs and rock & roll." Given your own problems with drugs over the years and the reported rise in heroin and cocaine addiction in the past two decades, do you think such proselytizing may have been a mistake?

Yeah. All of those rallying cries are. I mean, they're all slogans, and necessarily they're very simplistic. Obviously, there was drugs in rock & roll, and the sex wasn't too bad. But, I mean, I don't know anybody that actually lives like that all the time. I used to know a few guys that did, but they're not alive anymore, you know? And you kinda get the message after you've been to a few funerals.

A lot of young acts pride themselves on being drug-free. They take part in anti-drug campaigns and play benefit concerts for various causes. Do you relate to this cleaned-up scene at all?

I'm sure the principles may be sort of admirable, but I know this business too well. I have to doubt the motives in many, many cases, you know? I mean, I'm not gonna smear anybody, but this is one route to gettin' more exposure. It's a bandwagon to jump on. And also, it's a way for the so-called system, or the authorities or whatever, to sort of harness the music for their own purposes. I mean, in England now, everybody's leaping around with the Prince and Princess of Wales – "Come over the palace," you know? Jesus, I mean, it's ridiculous. Everybody's cozyin' up... It is sort of odd to see rock in the hands of so many goody-goody groups now. Yeah, I know. It's basically against the whole idea of what always made rock & roll music interesting to me. I thought it was an unassailable outlet for some pure and natural expressions of rebellion. It was one channel you could take without havin' to kiss ass, you know? And right now it just seems like they're on a big daisy chain, each kissin' each other's asses.

This is the age of AIDS, and of drugs that are even worse than any that existed before. What do you tell your kids about stuff like that?

The kids I've got are old enough to worry about it. As far as I know, they've got a pretty good attitude toward that. I mean, Marlon's 18; Angela, she's 15. And they're incredibly straightforward kids – especially considering when they were brought up and how... I really never had any problems with them. I mean, Marlon's more like a mate of mine. Now and again, he puts me on the hot spot. Like, I have to go and see his principal at school. "How could you do this to me, Marlon? I haven't been in a principal's office for 30 years." And I hated it.

A lot of people think Keith Richards is the Stones. How do you respond to that notion?

It's far more subtle than that. I mean, there's no way you can say that any one person is the band and the rest are just padding. It is such a subtle mixture of characters and personalities and how you deal with each other. And if it works right, you never think about it yourself, because there's always the fear that if you analyze it, you'll blow it, you know? So you don't really wanna know. You'll just come up with something – a song or a riff – and you'll say, "I think we can nail this down." And you'll see a little look of mystification come over the rest of the band's faces. And if you feel strongly enough about it, you'll push it and push it, and they might be going, "Oh, no, not again." And then suddenly – if you were right – you'll look around and see that boom, click, and then it falls into place. And you say, "Oh, good, thank God – let's go, quick, before they lose it again."

I mean, it is the most difficult thing to talk about, because you feel that if you probe it too hard, it's just gonna collapse. You just go on this search for something, and bang, suddenly it happens. And then it infects everybody straightaway – suddenly, everybody knows what it is they've gotta do.

Have you ever considered writing your autobiography?

No, I haven't, really. Because, I mean, I've only got to, like, Chapter 3, you know? I wouldn't know how to tie it all up. I gotta know the ending first – or at least be pretty close to it – before I can get a handle on what's gone down.

Have you arrived at any spiritual conclusions?

No. I'm just more and more convinced that I'll find out when I'm supposed to find out. I mean, I've been closer to death a few



Satanic Majesty

The Stones in their finest psychedelic gear: Jagger, Richards, Watts, Wyman and Jones

more times than a lot of people. And what I've found out is that whatever it is, it's worth waiting for, you know?

Do you think you've mellowed over the years?

I guess everybody does, in a way. I mean, I enjoy doing things now I would never have had the patience for 20 years ago. Like kids – I actually enjoy bouncing babies on my knee and shit, you know? And I enjoy goin' to see, like, me dad. We got together again in 1982, after 20 years of trepidation. 'Cause when the Stones started, it had been, like, him or me: "I'm leavin'! I gotta go!" And I moved to London. So after 20 years, we got it back together: Me dad's comin' down to see me, and I'm sort of waitin' to get "Hi, son" – bop! But then this little guy came out, real sweet and... aw, shit, you know? Now we sit around and play dominoes. And he can still drink more'n me.

Back in the Seventies, the Stones seemed in danger of splitting along the lines of your down-to-earth rock & roll instincts and Mick's jet-set lifestyle. What was really going on there?

There you've got the seeds of why we're not together right now. Mick and I have different attitudes, and throughout most of the Seventies, I was living in another world from him. I didn't blame him – he'd earned the right to do what he wanted. It was just that I couldn't relate to that. And even if I could've related to it, I was too busy bein' busted – which, I mean, is equally as dumb. Mick and I are incredibly diverse people. While a certain part of our personalities is incredibly close, there's an awful lot which is very, very different. And so it kind of got up my nose a bit, that jet-set shit and the flaunting of it. But he's a lonely guy, too. He's got his own problems, you know?

If you weren't so different in some ways, the musical chemistry probably wouldn't be the same.

Precisely. So it doesn't rankle me. I'm his friend, and he knows it. It's just, "I love you, darling, but I can't live with you."

The Stones have succeeded in removing age as an issue from the making of rock & roll.

Maybe that's because of what I was saying – that rock became a global thing just at that point where we started, and that enlarged all of the possibilities. That's really what rock & roll did, bless its old heart. It was – and still is, in a way – at the forefront of turning this little planet of ours on to the idea that it is a planet. It's managed to cross right through opposing countries and ideologies. I mean, you'll never get rid of nationalism and so-called patriotism and all that. But the important thing is to spread the idea that there's really this one planet. And all these little lines that were drawn by guys hundreds of years ago are really obsolete. And if we don't realize that, there won't be anything much in the world, you know? There's 5 billion of us now, man – in the Fifties, there was only 2½ billion. We managed to double it in 30-some years. So in the long term, maybe that's the most important thing that rock & roll's done – it's opened up people's minds about these things.

Even if it hasn't taught us all how to love one another.

Yeah. Like, "Now we're gonna give all 5 billion of you your daily drop of acid, and the maharishi's gonna come down and tell you how to deal with it" [laughs].

Maybe the true essence of rock & roll is simply that it was always great fun.

[It is] great fun. You can take everything else, but don't take the fun out of it, man. I mean, if they take the fun out of this life – I'll leave.