

10 Second Life and the Dynamics of Revival: The Stones after 1989

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1989 marked the end of one career and the beginning of another for the Rolling Stones. The year capped almost a decade of disharmony and uneven musical production – “Giants Enter a Deep Sleep” is how Elliott describes this period¹ – and witnesses the most acrimonious chapter in the venerable Jagger/Richards partnership, one of the most creative collaborative musical relationships in popular music history. Although the decade began with a successful tour in 1981–82 to promote the album *Tattoo You*, memorialized in the pastel-heavy Hal Ashby-produced film *Let’s Spend the Night Together*, the animosity within the entire band continued into the mid-1980s. With Richards’ addictions and resultant legal troubles reaching a critical stage, control of the group tilted decisively (and understandably) in the direction of Jagger, who remained resolutely in charge. As producer Chris Kimsey remembers from the recording sessions of their grunge- and funk-influenced album *Undercover* (1983),

When we got to making *Undercover*, that was the worst time I’d ever experienced with them . . . We recorded a lot of it in Nassau [Bahamas], then mixed it in New York, at the Hit Factory. I would get Mick in the studio from like, midday until seven o’clock, then Keith from like, nine o’clock till five in the morning. They would not be together. They specifically avoided each other. Mick would say, “When’s he coming in? I’ll be there later.” After about a week, it was killing me. And it was such silly things, like one would say, “What did he do?” And I’d play a bit, and the other would say, “Get rid of it.”²

Nevertheless, in a decade dominated by the emergence of new platforms for accessing music in sound and image – the rise of the compact disc, Blockbuster, MTV, cable networks, the personal computer – the Stones remained in business, and, to be sure, *a* business (anticipating Jay-Z’s famous declaration that “I’m not a businessman; I’m a *business*, man”). 1981, for example, sees many enquiries about Stones-related projects by Showtime, HBO, home video providers, and even for tie-ins with hotels, along with proposals for concerts to be shown on pay-per-view offerings, which had already proved to be successful in broadcasting high-profile sporting events such as championship boxing matches.³

A flood of licensing requests came to the group's attention: MCA wanted to use "Start Me Up" and "Miss You" in their TV show *Miami Vice*; the Ed Sullivan show asked for footage of the Stones' famous performances during the 1960s for use in the *Best of Sullivan* broadcasts; and representatives for Jerry Lewis inquired about airing videos of "Miss You," "Respectable," and "Far Away Eyes" for broadcast on the annual Muscular Dystrophy Telethon.⁴ Noting that club dance music was once again dominating the pop charts along with the emergence of rap, sampling, and remixing, Atlantic decided to release 12" dance product of "Too Much Blood" (from *Undercover*), remixed by producer Arthur Baker to create three versions: dance, album, and dub. Although touring was on hold and band relationships were chilly, requests to perform in Eastern Europe and China were considered.⁵ In 1982, there were meetings to discuss ideas about a Rolling Stones merchandising and sportswear line, with a possible test market being Italy, "where the Rock and Roll concept [can be translated] most effectively."⁶ By the mid-1980s, tensions between band members became further strained when first Jagger, and then, finally, Richards, Wood, and even Watts, decided to pursue solo projects or collaborations with other artists, and in general reassess their own frayed relationships and overall concept of what the Stones were as a band.⁷ Their contractually obligated inaugural album for CBS, the aptly-titled *Dirty Work* (1986), and the promotional video of the opening track, "One Hit to the Body," in particular, demonstrated for all to see the raw (but visually dramatic), adversarial relationship that had opened up between Jagger and Richards. The album was certified Platinum, but the songwriting is at best compliant and un compelling. The writing on the wall did not forecast a return to greatness.

But the next few years saw a lasting and brilliant solution to these problems. In 1989, with considerable financial backing and an enormous fanbase with disposable income emerging from the Reagan years, the group mounted a full-fledged return as a living, touring, and recording group, initiating a formidable revival, now going on thirty years, that has helped to stimulate virtually every sector of the rock industry and allow the Stones to take control of their own history, rather than have it managed for them. When Bill Clinton was elected President of the United States in November, 1992, to the soundtrack of Fleetwood Mac's "Don't Stop Thinking About Tomorrow," Baby Boomers, classic rock, the nascent internet, Al Gore's dual call to care for the environment as well as accelerate the use of technology, and rock's first adult generation all converged on the podium. The Rolling Stones would soon occupy the center of this new world. Rock has always functioned as an important source of youth identity, but the "second life" revival of the Stones forced a



Figure 10.1 Hasbro “Rolling Stones Trivial Pursuit” (c. 2010). Photo by author.

reconsideration of who rock’s fans and consumers were. The Stones clearly understood that rock was no longer the language *only* of youth.

The Stones’ revival capitalized on the musical and economic opportunities made possible by a new business model of the rock industry: corporate sponsorship, and promoters guaranteeing enormous artist fees in return for revenue streams from licensing and the sale of official merchandise – not just T-shirts and tour posters, but intimate apparel, high-end Globe-trotter luggage, and even a franchise of the Trivial Pursuit Collector’s Edition board game (see Figure 10.1).⁸ Just as important in this revival was the recognition of the Stones as culture, and by extension, the validation of rock music as part of history, in which the Stones, along with the Beatles, Clapton, and others, occupied an aristocratic and privileged position. This history was institutionalized by several factors: the construction and programming of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, of which the Stones became laureates in 1989; the academic inclusion of rock music within the

university curriculum and the production of scholarly research; authorized film documentaries such as Lorne Michaels' *25 × 5* of 1989 – which was even deployed for annual funding drives by the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) – tracing the history of the group and released to coincide with the 1989 tour; curated rock exhibits at major museums that revalued rock instruments as *objets d'art*; and, of course, the latent economic power contained in their output of almost 400 songs that eventually became the first major rock catalog available on iTunes (years before the Beatles), and is now, of course, part of the streaming libraries of Pandora, Spotify, Amazon, and Apple Music.⁹ In terms of their fan base, the Stones succeeded not only in sustaining their original “Nation” of fans, but in reaching new audiences globally, with shows in Latin America, India, and Russia, and no doubt aided by the cameo appearances of more contemporary artists on stage with them. Tightly bound into their “Nation” are allegiances that define social politics, lifestyles, worldviews, and communities. Even the use of their trademark lapping tongue, an image that is both sexual and cheeky, has evolved into a strong symbol of identification and an instant branding of the group for their formidable merchandise enterprise.¹⁰ For their fans, the Stones seem to provide a modern sanctuary, an escape from a world often obsessed by the cultural and puritanical politics of correctness, sex, and language, and an antidote of authenticity to the puerility of many synthetic, trend-driven, and rootless pop genres.

In short, over the last thirty years the Stones have carefully curated their musical legacy as a way to memorialize their historical position within popular music. With the *Steel Wheels/Urban Jungle* tour of 1989, a venture that sparked the major resurgence of the band, the Stones seized upon the possibilities offered by new technologies in video (such as the IMAX film *Stones at the Max* [1991]) and the growing retail videocassette/DVD market (producing concert films of all of their tours) towards carefully constructing their historical image, a method of representation that was more immediate and visually affirmative than through new recordings. Five years later, during the retro *Voodoo Lounge* tour of 1994–95, which marks the arrival on the scene of bass player Darryl Jones as a replacement for Bill Wyman, the Stones issued two concert films, appearing both as Renaissance aristocrats in *Voodoo Lounge* (1994) and as a tough, leather-and-jean-clad club band for the mainly acoustic project *Stripped* (1995), much of it filmed in grainy black-and-white, a look that aligned with their first cover ever of a Bob Dylan song – naturally, “Like a Rolling Stone” – of which the group’s version and promotional video are stunningly good. The *Stripped* project also capitalized on the very popular format of MTV’s “Unplugged” series that was critical in the mass resurgence of Eric Clapton (and the Martin Guitar Company) in 1992, featuring his acoustic renditions

of his most famous songs. Beyond the films, the colossal dimensions of the architectural design and stage production of their live shows, particularly for the *Bridges to Babylon* tour of 1997–98, allowed the group to create a full retrospective of their career through the projection of a vast archive of digital imagery and props, while also “returning” them to their origins as a club band through the use of a secondary “club” stage that was set up towards the back of the stadium or arena, on which the group played a short selection of famous singles in close proximity to fans. The Rolling Stones show became a lesson in history.

In a widely circulated story about Neil Young, the singer performs a concert in which he plays only his newest – and, therefore, unfamiliar – material from his latest album. As the new songs begin to pile up, one after another, longtime fans who came to hear his greatest hits begin shouting for him to play his classic older songs: “Heart of Gold!” “Southern Man!” etc. Finally, Young announces to the audience that he is going to play “a song you’ve heard before,” and as the crowd cheers in appreciation, he repeats the first song he played that night. This tale illustrates the difficulty faced by artists whose canonic repertory – for the Stones this would be their music generally through *Exile* with the addition of another half-dozen singles – has defined and complicated their own historical position and the close relationship with their fanbase(s). The Neil Young story underlines the irony of how the classic rock format, tribute bands, and the predictable economic certainty of releasing greatest hits packages over new product, has both sustained the Stones and limited their creativity.¹¹ The group released two greatest hits anthologies after 1989: *Forty Licks* in 2002, to commemorate their 40th year and kick off a tour of the same name, and *GRRR*, in 2012, to mark the band’s golden anniversary and the *Fifty and Counting* tour. This album, naturally, contained fifty songs, thirty-two of which had appeared earlier on *Forty Licks*, along with a few pieces of newer material. To justify the considerable duplication of songs contained on previous anthologies, some of the older tracks were remastered, often – but not always – resulting in an enhancement of the originals.

But the fact remains that if tours are traditionally linked to the release of new product – “product” today can be expanded to include EP, single, and album formats, as well as video and film scores – and the products in these cases consist of two greatest hits packages that are central to the branding, merchandising, and publicity of the tours, it is only natural that the last remaining variable (and hopefully still the most important!), *the set list*, will be determined by greatest hits programming. And given the many

concordances between *Forty Licks* and *GRRR*, this results in almost two-thirds of the set lists being identical for tours that are a decade apart.

A more historically and musically compelling solution of presenting earlier material was achieved through a marvelous Stones pre-tour show in 2015 at the Fonda Theatre in Los Angeles, in which they gave a complete performance of a single album, *Sticky Fingers* (though not in the same running order as on the record). The concept has recently been used by U2 (performing all of *The Joshua Tree* [1987] in 2017) and Van Morrison (all of *Astral Weeks* [1968] at the Hollywood Bowl in 2009), among others. Of course, complete concept albums like *Tommy*, *Quadrophenia*, and *Dark Side of the Moon* were regularly performed live during the 1970s from beginning to end.¹² As an album, *Sticky Fingers* is dark, replete with references to addiction and withdrawal, and containing some of the Stones' greatest work, with two of the central songs on the album, "Wild Horses" and "You Gotta Move" both recorded much earlier in the famous Muscle Shoals studio in Alabama during their well-documented 1969 tour. The album comes right at the moment of their exile and narrates the closing darkness from the shades being drawn on the sixties. But it is also a *musician's* album: The Stones demonstrate so many different roots techniques (bottleneck, Delta strumming, country idioms), tunings (standard, E, "Spanish" [or G], and "Nashville" [playing without the lower octaves on a 12-string]), vocal dialects, and lyrical images, as well as mastery of the stylistic idioms in country, folk, Mississippi Delta, rock and roll, Latin-jazz, and R&B. The album is also the first to feature the full contribution of Mick Taylor, and there is no question that his stylish playing and deep knowledge of styles are critical to the group's sound. With two further personnel changes to come (Taylor to Wood and Wyman to Jones), it is no wonder, then, that many of the songs from *Sticky Fingers* have been performed live only infrequently since they originally appeared in 1971: While "Brown Sugar" and "Bitch" had been in the live set for decades, "Sister Morphine" was not played live until 1997's *Bridges to Babylon* tour, with "Sway" receiving its first live performance during the *Bigger Bang* tour in 2005. Similarly, "Can't You Hear Me Knocking," which brought Taylor's deft improvisational skills out of the shadows, was performed once in 1971, but not again until three decades later, long after Taylor left the band; "Moonlight Mile" was finally given a performance only in 1999. Thus, there has been no continuous performing tradition for most of the songs on *Sticky Fingers* or a *priori* notion of how they should go, how they will be received, and how well they are known, other than how audiences basically remember them. It will be surprising to know that "Wild Horses" (despite its popularity as one of the group's most exquisite ballads) is not even one of the thirty most-performed songs by the group, and has been

played live only slightly more than “Saint of Me” (*Bridges to Babylon*, 1997) and “I Go Wild” (*Voodoo Lounge*, 1994).¹³

The Stones’ fresh and historical approach in the *Sticky Fingers* performance at the Fonda Theatre is clear from the start. Ron Wood is outstanding through his versatility and commitment to the poetic aspect of the music, particularly evident in his remarkable playing on “Sister Morphine,” clearly referencing Ry Cooder’s original slide parts on the album, and transforming this folk song of despair to one of trauma. Indeed, his conscious use of the original and iconic threads of *Sticky Fingers* is a crucial aspect of revival and the Stones’ ability to stitch the present onto the past. This is one of the finest performances of the Stones ever captured on video.

Some of the new material from the last thirty years has achieved familiarity in the Stones’ vast song catalog and received critical acclaim. This is because in *Steel Wheels*, their 1989 “comeback” album recorded at Sir George Martin’s AIR Studios in Montserrat, the Stones “sound” like the Stones. Unlike their efforts in *Undercover* (1983) and the appropriately titled *Dirty Work* (1986), their riff-based sound and their musical instincts return in songs like “Sad, Sad, Sad” and “Mixed Emotions.”¹⁴ Other songs, like “Slipping Away” from *Steel Wheels*, a beautiful ballad written and sung by Richards, along with the later “Saint of Me” and “I Go Wild,” cited above, “Out of Control” (*Bridges*), and “You Got Me Rocking” (*Voodoo Lounge*), all became staples of their live set for many years. As the Stones’ revival quickly became a monumental financial success, for *Voodoo Lounge* of 1994 – the second album of new material, coinciding with a tour on an even larger scale than *Steel Wheels* – the Stones brought in famous rock producer and bass player Don Was, a fan of the Stones since he was twelve. Was’ creative philosophy in producing this album was to push the group towards recapturing their iconic sound and hit singles of the sixties and early seventies – in short, to make a retro album, a decision accepted only reluctantly by Jagger and Richards. Nevertheless, *Voodoo Lounge* contains some of the most consistently high quality and compelling original compositions by the Stones of the past thirty years. The album has the classic riff-driven Stones presence; but it is not just a riff for the sake of a riff (as is sometimes the case on *Steel Wheels*), but rather the riff becomes a point of reference to the great Stones compositions of the past. Almost every song on *Voodoo Lounge* seems to have a “parent” composition in the Stones’ past catalog: The dark opening song “Love is Strong” is allied with “Gimme Shelter” or “Dancing with Mr. D,” themselves opening songs on *Let It Bleed* and *Goats Head Soup*, respectively. The dizzying “Sparks Will Fly” channels “All Down the Line” from *Exile*, but also employs a wonderfully “retro” refrain that seems right out of “Let’s Spend

the Night Together.” The ballad “Out of Tears” brings to mind “Angie,” and the use of harpsichord and Baroque overtones on “New Faces” echoes the sixties London of “Play with Fire” and “Ruby Tuesday.” One of the most successful Stones albums after 1989, *Voodoo Lounge* debuted at No. 1 and No. 2 in the UK and USA, respectively, and won the 1995 Grammy Award for Best Rock Album.

Dissatisfied, however, with the retro result of *Voodoo Lounge*, and with a unified approach to recording far from being assured with Jagger and Richards at different ends of the creative spectrum, the group opted for a contrasting, contemporary, sound for their next release, *Bridges to Babylon* (1997). Although this project saw the return of Don Was as producer, he mostly worked in Richards’ camp; Jagger, on the other hand, was keen to experiment with loops and samples and engaged the Los Angeles team, the Dust Brothers, who had previously worked with Beck (*Odelay*, 1996) and the Beastie Boys (*Paul’s Boutique*, 1989), as well as producer and DJ Danny Saber, to work on several tracks. With regard to Jagger and Richards, each had his own studio, so they could record their own songs how they wanted. Not surprisingly, the end result on *Bridges* is mixed. The samples, loops, and synthesized sounds were not compelling for Richards, though the main single from the album, “Anybody Seen My Baby,” and its dozen remixes show that the experimentations by Jagger had both artistic merit – and tangible results. The best song on the album is “Out of Control,” a dramatic, theatrical, and episodic piece that draws its bass line, self-referentially, from the Temptations’ “Papa Was a Rolling Stone.” The Stones, of course, had already covered the Temptations’ “Just My Imagination” on *Some Girls*, and “Ain’t Too Proud to Beg” on *It’s Only Rock ’n Roll*; a later remix of “Out of Control” seems to confirm the connection between the two songs by including some Temptations samples.¹⁵ “Out of Control” became one of the highlights of the live show, with the stage and Jagger’s dancing flooded by white strobe lights with each return of the refrain.

The last two studio albums, *A Bigger Bang* (2005) and *Blue and Lonesome* (2016), return to music for the core band, are devoid of horn sections and many extra musicians, and instead are dedicated to producing what is largely understood by fans as the “classic” Rolling Stones sound. It is difficult, however, to reconcile what is on these albums with anything resembling “authentic” Stones, and despite the fact that the material on *Blue* consists entirely of blues arrangements, they are hardly “covers” in the sense of duplicating a previous record, as the Stones did on their earliest albums. As true bluesmen themselves since their exilic period, for the Stones the blues repertory is a retelling of a story in the venerable oral tradition, not a mimicry or a photocopy on thicker paper. Indeed, *A Bigger*

Bang delivers mainly a raw, urban sound – a distant echo, perhaps, of *Some Girls* – live off the floor with natural overdrive, but light on technology or studio effects as on *Bridges*.¹⁶ With the absence of Charlie Watts (recuperating from radiation treatment for throat cancer – thankfully, in remission) and Ron Wood (working his way successfully through rehab), the album was begun by just Jagger and Richards, leading to a welcome *déjà vu* camaraderie that is evident in the singular approach to both the sound of the album and the composition of the songs. On the whole, though, the final product is uneven. And no matter how good some of the songs are – “Rough Justice,” “Let Me Down Slow,” and the sinister “Back of My Hand” blues – in live performance they assume a subsidiary role to the older material. By contrast, the core works from the large Stones catalog are given grand, theatrical stagings in performance. “Gimme Shelter” has turned into a virtuoso, show-stopping operatic duet between Mick Jagger and Lisa Fisher that creates a tremendous surge in the emotional and dramatic level of the show. Both “Sympathy for the Devil” and “You Can’t Always Get What You Want” are planned on an even grander scale; they use the entire multi-tiered stage, the works broadening out into symphonic proportions of sound, gesture, numbers of musicians, imagery, choristers, and staging.

Since their “return” with *Steel Wheels* in 1989, followed in 1991 by an IMAX film that monumentalized their presence in the public square of rock and roll, the Rolling Stones have created a massive second life through the creative and innovative leveraging of their enormous repertory of musical assets. Aware of the cultural and economic value of their past and fiercely opposed to the cheapening of pop music as a result of pandering to fleeting musical tastes, they have been able to curate a living museum in which their history is represented live, digitally, on film, and as merchandise.¹⁷ They have tapped into the desires of a fan base they have cultivated for over fifty years, and they accept their role as a rock *cicerone*, leading listeners to the roots of popular music, as well as by revealing the magnitude of their own influence in music history through their many live song collaborations with artists of later generations. It is the reason why their music persists over time.

Notes

1 Elliott, *RSCRS*, 235.

2 Quoted in Rich Cohen, “Inside Mick Jagger and Keith Richards’s Five-Decade Bromance,” *Vanity Fair* (April 1, 2016). For a frank chronicle of some of the dysfunctionality of the group at this time, see *Life*, 431–5.

3 Rock Hall, Jeff Gold Collection, Art Collins Correspondence, 1978–85.

4 *Ibid.*

5 *Ibid.*

6 Rock Hall, Jeff Gold Collection, Alvinia Bridges/Rolling Stones Documents, 1981–83. Memo from Joyce Moy to Mick Jagger, November 1, 1982.

7 See *Life*, 453–64, for one side of the Jagger/Richards relationship during this period.

8 On the business model used to market the tours by promoter Michael Cohl, see Andrew Serwer, “Inside the Rolling Stones, Inc.,” *Fortune* (September 30, 2002): money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/fortune_archive/2002/09/30/329302/ (accessed February 27, 2019).

9 On rock’s position in music history and the electric guitar as an *objet d’art*, see Victor Coelho, “Picking through Cultures: A Guitarist’s Music History,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Guitar*, ed. Victor Coelho (Cambridge, 2002), 1–14.

10 A clear example of the identification of the Stones’ lapping tongue logo with the band’s image in popular culture is illustrated by a character in the HBO series, *The Sopranos*. Janice Soprano (played by Aida Turturro) is the wayward, rebellious, and troubled sister of mob boss Tony Soprano. Janice sports a tattoo of the tongue logo on her breast. When Turturro was asked if the tattoo was real, she replied, “No, it’s not real. But when I met Keith Richards, I think he was disappointed. I said, ‘But I wear it a lot!’” The addition of the logo was clearly a conscious choice by producers of the show. See “The Sopranos’ Aida Turturro Talks About Fighting Hunger and Her Hit Show,” CNN.com (March 20, 2001): www.cnn.com/chat/transcripts/2001/03/20/turturro/ (accessed February 27, 2019).

11 For an account of life in a Stones tribute band, see Steven Kurutz, *Like a Rolling Stone: The Strange Life of a Tribute Band* (New York, 2008). For a study of tribute bands more broadly, see Georgina Gregory, *Send in the Clones: A Cultural Study of the Tribute Band* (Sheffield, UK and Bristol, CT, 2012).

12 Other notable examples include 1970s progressive rockers Yes, who toured widely in 2013 performing three albums in their entirety (*The Yes Album*, *Close to the Edge*, and *Going for the One*), and Jethro Tull’s Ian Anderson, who performed *Thick as a Brick* on tour in 2012, coupled with his recent release, *Thick as a Brick 2*.

13 These data, compiled at www.setlist.fm/stats/the-rolling-stones-bd6ad22.html (accessed February 27, 2019), are inclusive of concerts through October, 2018 and comprise, admittedly, a purely quantitative approach without a description of the data collection methods, but the filters do allow for many types of revealing searches, and the results can be verified elsewhere.

14 Shortly after the *Steel Wheels* sessions, Air Studios, along with most of the island, was totally destroyed by Hurricane Hugo in 1989, followed by the further devastation caused by the eruption of the Soufrière volcano in 1995. For a fascinating archaeological study of the site and its rock (and roll) artifacts, see J. F. Cherry, K. Ryzewski, and L. J. Pecoraro, “‘A Kind of Sacred Place’: The Rock-and-Roll Ruins of AIR Studios, Montserrat,” in *Archaeologies of Mobility and Movement: Contributions to Global Historical Archaeology*, ed. M. Beaudry and T. Parno (New York, 2013), 181–98.

15 See Elliott, *RSCRS*, 316.

16 See *RSG*, 610–13.

17 Indeed, two recent exhibitions dedicated to the Stones have examined the group’s entire body of work in this context: the *Rolling Stones: 50 Years of Satisfaction* exhibit at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Museum (2013), and the more instrument- and amp-heavy traveling show *Exhibitionism* (2016–), with full participation by the group.