

**EXILE ON MAIN STREET**  
**Classic Rock Albums series**

**John Perry**

**Schirmer Books**

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*Review by Humphrey Keenlyside*

Exile on Main Street, John Perry's lovingly crafted review of our favourite double album of all time, is writing and analysis right out of the top drawer. There are few better qualified than John Perry to tackle the subject. A musician of some repute himself (as guitarist with The Only Ones), he has played the same chords, taken the same drugs and lived the same lifestyle (just read his eye-opening account of life in LA in the May issue of *Mojo* magazine). He knows his riffs - and evidently knows Mr Human Riff himself as he lets drop that he has jammed with Keith. But this is no mere name-dropping, it is used simply to illustrate how he watched Keith works for hours and hours at a riff until he gets the right "feel".

John Perry is in no doubt that this is Keith's album: not only was it recorded in the basement of Nellcôte (as Mick Taylor said, 'Keith could stumble out of bed right into the studio'), but arguably more than any other Stones album you can feel the hand of Keith stamped on every single track. Since Perry is so obviously a fan of Keith, his book concentrates on Keith's contribution - although there are plenty of honourable mentions for all members of the band and the sidemen. He describes the Stones as a "modern swing band", which in my book is absolutely spot on. The rock *with the roll*.

He charts the rise of the band's first - and greatest - decade, from the eager young London boys breaking through with their love of rhythm and blues, through the London aristocratic social scene of the 1960s to, well, rock and roll exile in France. Pertinently, Perry notes that it was the really the last record the band made as Englishmen: thereafter, all but permanently exiled from their homeland, if not from their roots, their albums became more cosmopolitan (recorded in Paris, New York, Munich, Montserrat etc).

And then it is down to the business of dissecting the songs one by one, headphones clamped on and volume turned right up. The result is the most thorough and entertaining analysis ever made of Exile. No detail is too small for Perry. Noting a key change into a minor chord at 2:26, the two-bar organ fills, whether or not Keith's guitar is capoed on a certain song, measuring the tempos and poring over every last mouth-bending inflection of the vocals may not be to everyone's taste, but for those who like to get behind the raw feel of the Stones' music it makes for excellent reading.

Many more of us will be interested to learn of the Keith style of arranging which decrees that you have to have something new every 10 seconds to keep the listener's interest up. Amazing to reflect that in his then-parlous state of health, Keith could still turn his mind to such

minutiae. But then Keith probably has the hardiest constitution of anyone on this planet. And did you know that Shine a Light is a coded love song from Mick to Keith? At least, that is what John Perry thinks. What makes this especially good for fans is that Perry has listened to the alternative takes and demos and traces their progress to the final record.

Reprinted are some of the original reviews that accompanied the release of the album, including a less than fulsome review by Lenny Kaye in *Rolling Stone*. Piece by piece, John Perry demolishes Kaye's sniffy review and shows what absolute tosh he was talking, being especially dismissive of Kaye's pathetic comment that Torn and Frayed has "trouble getting started". "I know that Lenny Kaye plays guitar himself," Perry writes, "and if this intro is in trouble, he should wish for a little of the same."

However, it is fair to note that Exile did catch a lot of people by surprise on its release and did take some getting used to. Even to this day, I feel that whatever the justification for Mick's vocals being buried in the mix (to make his voice sound just like one of the instruments), it spoils many of the tracks (Ventilator Blues) and detracts from the raw power of a few others (Soul Survivor). It is only really with the CD remastering that we come close to a good balance.

In comes a conversation with Anita Pallenberg who reflects on the complete chaos that surrounded the making of the album. You hold on to your hat as Keith steers motorboats like a madman over rocks; you plug in and flush out as the assembled company tap into the French railway network for the electricity supply; you draw your pistol as the local Marseilles mafia knock ominously on the door to Villa Nellcôte. Anita reveals that they had an escape route planned entailing scrambling out of windows and on to roofs before disappearing into the night. Truly, dangerous times. It is a miracle that anything came out of those sessions, let alone an album of such quality. Perry is full of praise - and rightly so - for Jimmy Miller's production who had to battle with instruments constantly going out of tune in the humid basement.

Above all, he's one of us: Perry is a fan through and through. We cheer him when he says he cherishes the day when a friend of his arrived on his doorstep on his 20th birthday brandishing the "new Stones album" - a record that he still holds dear more than 25 years later.

Reading Exile on Main Street will make you head straight for your record collection (or CD collection) and listen again to every track anew. I guarantee you will hear something you hadn't heard before, aided by John Perry's analysis. And, I bet, too, that you will come away invigorated, inspired and just thankful that the Stones ever existed. One day, they will be no more, but thankfully we will always have their music.