

Movie Review: Gimme Shelter DVD Re-release, September 2009

I imagine that most movies look pretty good when you're lounging in a very capacious seat in the screening room of the Soho Hotel, cold Mexican beer in hand. And thanks to the largesse of Warner Home Video (thanks, Sam) I had to review the new version of Gimme Shelter under this handicap. However Gimme Shelter would still be a great movie if you watched it on my steam-driven portable telly on nothing stronger than PG Tips.

The new version improves considerably on what's gone before – the cinema release from the early 70's (saw it on Shaftesbury Avenue for 2/6) and the Criterion DVD release from 2000. The remastered sound allows the Stones concert performances to leap out of the speakers – the closing live version of the title track is about the most savage version I've ever heard them do. But the improved definition also allows greater separation and clarity so that the melodicism of Mick Taylor's solo on Love In Vain (accompanied by some slo-mo shots of Jagger at MSG) really comes through.

Picture quality is further improved over the Criterion release although we are still a long way from HD. Filmed on the run by the Maysles brothers using hand-held 16mm film the grainy quality of much of the footage works in favour of the film, giving it a cinema verite that makes the final denouement even more effective.

MSG '69 concert performances of Jumping Jack Flash and Satisfaction get the film off to a rousing start and made me want to get out of my seat and clap my hands, Thirty-six years later it is amazing how low was the stage and how casual the security – Jagger gets regularly molested by girls just jumping out of the audience. Then to a press conference where Jagger, stung by criticisms of excessive ticket prices on their current tour, rashly announces the date of a free concert (without having a confirmed venue). From there we see the increasingly frantic negotiations that culminated with the highly-unsuitable Altamont Raceway ending up as the venue by default, interspersed with great footage of the Stones recording at Muscle Shoals – a cool alternate Wild Horses soundtrack a close-up of Keith's outrageous snakeskin boots.

Even the enjoyment of the earlier live songs has been undermined by our knowledge of the terrible things to come. Cosy Woodstock-y shots of the stage being hastily erected and the freak-flag crowd beginning to arrive are undermined by Jagger being hit by a fan en route from helicopter to Portakabin and then the arrival of the Visgoths, aka the San Francisco branch of the Hells Angels. The Angels had been paid \$500 in beer to guard

the stage. In the aftermath of Altamont the Stones took a lot of stick for this decision, but they had used UK Hells Angels at Hyde Park earlier in the year very effectively. The relationship between the Angels and the Stones and their audience was clearly uneasy from the start – one of the most arresting images is of Angels Leader Sonny Berger looking at Jagger onstage prancing with a sneer of total contempt. Under the circumstances the Stones performance is remarkably good –the infamous murder of Meredith Hunter happens during a taut Under My Thumb. The response from the Stones defines their power base – Jagger starts wittering on about “Brothers and Sisters’ to no discernible effect whilst Keith Richards tells the Angels to cut it out.

We see the footage of the murder in the company of Jagger and Watts, who are shown reviewing the edits made by the Maysles and director Charlotte Zwerin. Charlie is clearly rattled and attempts to put things in perspective but Jagger has no words and leaves the editing suite as soon as he can. To see a control-freak like Jagger ineffectual onstage and speechless thereafter is a rare glimpse of his human fallibility.

The paranoia, hostility and downright unpleasantness means that Gimme Shelter has dated little (compare and contrast to the new edition of Woodstock). However for the keen Stones fan there is wonderful behind the scenes footage of their first tour with Mick Taylor, some rousing onstage performances and a great sense of atmosphere. But not exactly stardust or golden. - Simon Wright