

# *from the front line*

## **hand of fate**

THERE HE WAS, ON THE MORNING OF WEDNESDAY 27TH AUGUST, POTTERING ABOUT THE HOUSE, 200 MILES FROM LONDON AND CURSING HIS ROTTEN LUCK THAT HE HADN'T MANAGED TO SECURE A TICKET FOR THE ASTORIA SHOW THAT EVENING - AND WOULD NEVER GET TO SEE THE STONES PLAY AT A CLUB. BUT FATE HAD OTHER PLANS FOR STEVE BAKER. IT PLUCKED HIM FROM HIS HOUSE, DELIVERED HIM A PRICELESS TICKET FOR THE GIG, DUMPED HIM DOWN WITHIN TOUCHING DISTANCE OF MICK 'N' KEITH AND GAVE HIM A STONES' EXPERIENCE OF A LIFETIME.

### **Summer 2003**

The 29<sup>th</sup> August is getting near and I'm very excited about achieving a long-held ambition. I'm going to see the Rolling Stones indoors. My wife, son and I have tickets to Wembley arena. No need for waterproofs, no £12 programmes getting soggy in the rain, no craning my neck to try and see where the hell Jagger is. Yes, I'm going to see the Rolling Stones indoors. I'll be able to see and hear the band and the band will be able to see and hear each other, which rather helps, I imagine.

All this really ought to be enough..... but I can't stop thinking about the Astoria. Every few weeks I read on the web about another brave few who've queued all night and got into a club show. I've heard the bootlegs from great shows at the Tower and the Wiltren theatres. I dream of hearing 'That's How Strong My Love Is' and the like. Maybe if I get into London really early on the day of the gig? Plans begin to form in my mind.....

### **Monday 25th August**

It's 13 years to the day that I saw the Stones' last gig with Bill Wyman at Wembley stadium. Should be a good omen. Instead someone calling himself 'Gompercat' (and hoping to save me from a wasted journey) informs me via the Internet that there are *already* 10 people queuing outside the Astoria. Not a lot of point turning up at 6.00 am on Wednesday. Damn, damn, damn. Another dream bites the dust.

### **Wednesday 27th August**

**12.00 noon:** I'm trying to forget that it's the day of the club show. I'm doing the housework and minding the kids while the wife's at work. The phone rings. A voice tells me there are tickets being sold at a certain location in London from 2.00 pm this afternoon. Just for once I wish I didn't live in Yorkshire (that's 200 miles from London, my European friends!)

**2.00 pm:** I'm southbound on the M1 in my 'Brand New Car'. It's a Clio. I'm going to park the car in outer London and get the tube into the city. Then I'm just going to try my luck.....

**6.00 pm:** I'm there at last. A London hotel. I'm shown past what appears to be the set of Dynasty to a corridor on the first floor and an open door. A man bars my way. He wears a suit and is polite but firm:

"Sorry mate, no tickets".

"None at all?"

"No. None"

I look beyond him into the room and see a lady sitting behind a cash register. I ignore the suit and enter the room. She smiles. "Are you wanting to purchase a ticket?" (This is a tough

one. It's like asking, 'Would you like to score the winning goal for West Ham in the cup final, solve the third world debt problem and make love to Halle Berry all in the same day?') "Er..yes please," I somehow manage to say.

Then suddenly..... I have a wristband..... and a ticket.....My God! Where did that come from?

**9.40pm:** I am so hot. I am so thirsty. The Thrills were very good, but that was nearly an hour ago and I have been standing here sipping my pint of water (a very wise purchase) in a Tokyo-tube-style-crush for an hour and a half. Two big blokes (I'm a shade under 5' 8") have managed to squirm their way right in front of me. I'm still feeling lucky, but I've never been so uncomfortable and I just can't quite believe where I am or what I'm about to experience!

**9.42pm:** The opening chords of **Jumping Jack Flash** unleash a horizontal earthquake. It's bloody loud! A human Tsunami literally picks me up and dumps me four bodies back from right-in-front-of Keith. Plenty of punters must have been dragged backwards I guess but this really is my lucky day! Jagger is marching up and down; with sweatbands on his wrists, an aggressive pout and a very determined look in his eyes. Yes! I can see his eyes! And Keith is right in front of me! This is bloody amazing. I'm not watching a screen or an insect but a real man. Later the crowd will be calling "Keith, Keith, Keith!" but right now I only have eyes for Jagger. He is mesmerising. Working this tiny stage like his life depended on it. ("I actually tried starting a "Mick, Mick, Mick" shout later on but received only disdain from those around me. What does Mick have to do?!)

All this would be wonderful, but the crush is very scary. That tidal wave of people is chucking me and everyone else all over the place. A squat Japanese looking guy in a suit gives me an accusing look because I'm surfing on his back and he's bent double. Unfortunately I can't do anything to stop it and I can't concentrate on the music either because I'm too afraid of going under. Jagger ruthlessly whips up the crowd. I wish he wouldn't. We're fighting to stay on our feet down here! Still, I'm awestruck at the sight of these famous faces within spitting distance. (Maybe that's why Keith hated punk, if gobbing had caught on, he'd be covered in the stuff already!) Then it gets even better. The stage juts out into the audience for six feet or so. When Jagger moves out onto it, he's actually level with me!

**Live With Me** has the same momentum as the crowd, pitching, lurching and rushing like a fairground ride. **Hand of Fate** is brutal. Keith's guitar is mixed way up and the riffing is relentless. The band are hammering rather than swinging at this stage. But now I can focus on Keith Richards. My previous best Keith moment was Don Valley in '99 when he strode down towards us in those huge shades with his metal hair extensions, striking the opening poses and chords of the gig. After that he'd been further way. Tonight I have Keith doing his stuff right there in front of me *all the time*, doing these shy sideways glances and furtive smiles. Handing picks to the front row every now and then and generally hitting an 'I-can't-believe-that-you-can't-believe-that-you're-watching-me' kind of style.

**No Expectations** is slower (of course) and now I can plant my feet and begin to enjoy things. Jagger plays acoustic and Ronnie sits at a pedal steel, though I can hardly see him. He gets a big hug from Mick and Keith at the end. Jagger sits at the piano for **Worried about You** and does all the falsetto. Keith is marvellous to watch doing all the guitar riffs, clowning with Darryl and just being Keith in his blue shirt, black jeans, plimsolls and a black and white bandana.

Then Jagger announces **Heartbreaker**. First big surprise of the night. Keith and Ron's guitars lock into a powerful undercurrent for this one. The horn section appears. It's great to see the admiration on the trumpet player's face as Bobby keys plays his sax solo. It was better than the '94/5 version, the slow bits are slower and the fast bits are faster. Mick and Keith are really *into* it.

"What's the next song, Keith?" Keith wanders over to the set list like an old boy

inspecting a bus timetable. He nods with apparent indifference, stalks forward, crouches over and hits the intro to **It's Only Rock and Roll**. Some great gutbucket-boogie rhythm guitar ensues and now I have clear view of Mick and Keith and they clearly are competing for attention!

Jagger changes into a yellow t-shirt for the soul section of the show. First we get **Ain't Too Proud To Beg**. As with all the songs Jagger really works that crowd! (And despite what you might hear from the jaded club show vets desperate to broadcast their 'hardcore' cred, the audience really *did* respond. The only reason we weren't clapping along was that we couldn't raise our hands! They were needed to fend off the crush.) A feature of this song is the way Keith clearly enjoys hitting each power chord with a single flourish, leaving his arm in the air, like a one-armed rock and roll scarecrow.

It might be this song (corrections on a postcard please!) that ends a bar later than Jagger expects. He does that speeded-up Tai Chi move with an air of finality when he thinks the song is over and then there's an extra bar that catches him unawares, so he instantly repeats the move, but has to laugh and lets us in on his mistake.

Then it was **Everybody Needs Somebody To Love**. Jagger stayed on the ramp for ages and blew kisses in the direction of his kids on the balcony. He then runs up and down getting us to sing along, clearly meaning the "I'm so glad to be home" lyrics. At the end I saw what the chat room whingers have been complaining about. Chuck Leavell leading the band. Mick checks with Chuck who shakes his head and then four bars later Chuck gives him a nod and the song ends. It makes Mick seem suddenly human to see him hesitate and take direction like that.

Then Mick announces a soul ballad and I realise I'm going to hear **That's How Strong My Love Is**. My highlight of the night. Jagger spends most of the song standing right next to me on that ramp giving a great vocal that stretches from a whisper to a scream. The band and the horns merge perfectly. It builds and builds and when you think it's all over it builds up again. Superb. Now I'm getting carried away and yelling "oh, *yeah!*" like I do in only the greatest of mid-gig moments.

**Going to a Go-Go** is played with a wallop. It's great to be so close that I can actually hear Charlie's snare drum 'live' as well as the amplified sound. How does a 62-year-old bloke, wearing a white t-shirt, thumping the drums at the back of this riot manage to look so totally dignified?

People always talk about Mick's exercise regime etc. What about Charlie? He works incredibly hard and doesn't seem to break sweat. How does he do it? When the song ends, Keith gives all the horn section a 'gimme five' hand slap.

Then we had the introductions ("Ronnie, Ronnie seems to have replaced "Charlie, Charlie") Keith mumbles incoherently and announces '**The Nearness Of You**' "23 years in the making!" It's absolutely gorgeous. Better than any of those 4.00 am-in-the-studio bootleg versions. The backing vocals and the horns are lovely. Must get a record of this!

Keith announces **Before They Make Me Run**. He sings it with passion, giving a wry shrug to the 'well, you choose your medicine' line that could almost be a sign of remorse. Keith's guitar is still very loud in the mix and when he manages to nail one of those riffs that run through the song the effect is devastating. He times about 50% of them right. When they are on, they're on!

Jagger reappears in a purple shirt, still charging about with great zest and it's **I Can't Turn You Loose**, continuing the soul theme. Keith and Ronnie team up behind Jagger to swap knowing looks. I don't see much of Ronnie tonight because he's hidden behind Mick from where I stand. When I do see him, he's either wincing or waving his arms around! This song is a bore. A rather mechanical Motown riff that doesn't seem to involve the guitars. Jagger, whose vocal on 'That's How Strong' was brilliant, just can't do this one justice. The mix is a problem too. Like 'Can't Be Seen' in '90, they seem to be playing two songs at once.

Then it's **Honky Tonk Women**. Keith walks out onto the ramp right by me and pulls that one arm posture, making a monkey-scratch-my-armpit gesture with the other one. The

tempo is pleasingly fast and now I'm getting rather excited. THERE IS ROOM TO DANCE AT LAST and right under the nose of the 'human riff', too! Jagger and Lisa Fischer do all the saucy stuff but Keith is mesmerising. He plays the solo with eyes heavenwards, somehow lost in it and detached all at once. This is bloody great!

Then we get **Start Me Up**. I'm confused. Surely we aren't onto the home straight yet? That riff bludgeons such thoughts aside. It's deafening; a wall of noise. I'm also absolutely knackered and hanging on for dear life. For this song and **Tumbling Dice** I'm watching rather than listening for pleasure. The whole experience is beginning to drift by me like a dream. There's a huge guy behind me who has a screechy high silly-sod way of applauding everything, which is making my ears hurt like hell. I give him by best mean look and then he does it three times as much just to spite me. Oh well...

I know it has to be **Brown Sugar** next and the thought of this is enough to galvanise the senses. I'm back with it. *That* guitar, *that* riff, **that close!!** Keith gets into a groove, with his back to us, legs splayed, chugging out the riff, and it's one of those great nights when it swings and rocks! He kills it with a lethal stab and falls to his knees.

It's goodnight and then back on for **Satisfaction**. I'm spent and just drink in the sight of Mick in his fourth outfit (yellow shirt) and Keith in a bomber jacket over his bare chest. It's an overpowering ending rather than a rave up. We get the bows and then it's all over.

Some reviews of this show I've read on the net would leave you with the impression that it had been some kind of disaster. I can only say Charlie looked very happy and relaxed at the end of it all and Keith was clearly having a ball throughout. So what if Mick Taylor never appeared, and if we only got 19 songs? And I can only tell you that being for the first time *in the same room* as the Rolling Stones when they are playing is stunning. Mick, Keith and Charlie play with total concentration and obvious enjoyment. (Ronnie was a different man two days later at Wembley.)

Well worth the car journey, the anxiety, the queuing, the dehydration, the crush and the shoving. At £45 my ticket was a steal and I'm very, very lucky! I hope those who didn't share my good luck now have some idea of what it was like to be there. I heard today that some poor sod was first in the queue, waited two days and still didn't get in!