

Flashback

COURT AND SPARK

AS THE STONES PREPARE TO HIT THE ROAD, PERHAPS THIS TIME FOR THE VERY LAST TIME, HUMPHREY KEENLYSIDE RECALLS THAT SPINE-TINGLING MOMENT WHEN HE FIRST SAW THE BAND LIVE.

Seeing the Stones live for the first time was, for me, a long time a'coming. I had wanted to see them ever since I had been given my first LP, 12 x 5, for Christmas in 1964. At the time, my family was living in Singapore, and it just so happened that the band were due to play there early in 1965. But my father, surprise, surprise, refused to let me go. Would you let your son see a gig by the Rolling Stones? I kicked up an almighty fuss, but he wouldn't budge. I didn't miss much, though: my elder sister went and she said she couldn't hear a blind thing through all the screams except the whistling in **Walking the Dog**.

Four years later, I missed them playing at the Savile Row Theatre (after Altamont) because I was in Germany - again with my family. I couldn't go to either of the 1971 or '73 London shows, because I was at school, and wasn't allowed to attend. This was getting pretty damn tedious, so by the time the Stones announced the '76 tour of Europe, I was definitely not going to let this chance slip by. Hell, at 20 I was finally old enough to make decisions for myself...

Chasing paper

Buying tickets for Stones concerts is always a rush against time - and often a disappointment. For their last Babylon tour of the UK, I phoned the hotline to buy tickets at 9.00 a.m. on the morning the tickets went on sale. I was pretty confident when the phone was answered immediately: at last, I could get fantastic tickets (well, as good as any seat in a stadium can be). And what seats do I get offered? Seats half-way fucking back, nowhere near the front! What a scam buying tickets is: I resolved then and there that I would always buy standing tickets where at least you know you can get to the front, with a bit of pushing and shoving.

In 1976, buying tickets was even more of a lottery. As many people will already know, you had to apply for tickets by post - and there was no guarantee that you would be given them. It was all quite an exercise: sending off postal orders (the tickets were £4 a shot, which seemed like a fortune at the time to we impoverished university students), and you could only apply for a maximum of six per person, which meant having to apply under different names.

Anyway, my friend Dave and I each applied for six, thinking that we would be lucky if one of them came through. Our efforts paid off: both of our applications were successful: we got tickets for the Sunday show (the third of six, on 23rd May) and the final show, on the following Thursday, 27th May. The Thursday show was the day before our summer exams, but we weren't going to let *that* put us off.

Then Dave got an idea. Since the tickets had made such a dent in our meagre budget, why didn't we sell a couple outside the venue? We had already handed over four tickets for the Sunday show to friends, at cost price of course, but we reckoned that we could make a killing selling the others to desperate fans. We had read that one million people had applied for tickets for the six Earls Court shows; that was a lot of pent-up demand!

So on the Sunday, we took a train to London (from Cambridge), found our way to Earls

Court and started spouting that time-honoured phrase, “Any one looking for tickets for tonight’s show?” What a pathetic sight we were. Streams of people passed us on the way into the concert hall, but no one was buying. With the start time for the concert fast approaching, we were having serious misgivings about Dave’s strategy. What could we do? Give them away? Sell them cheap (remember, in those days, ticket touts weren’t such a feature of concert going).

Then it hit us. We should go in ourselves. Why not see the band twice (we were going to go and see them on Thursday, figuring that the last concert of the series would be *the* one to go to)? The excitement among the crowd was palpable, as it always is at Stones shows, and we must have drunk some of that in.

And that was how, with our hearts pumping, we went in just as the concert was about to start. Our seats were miles away, right at the back of the venue, but what did we care? The only problem was we would have to leave early to catch a train back to Cambridge. Actually there was another problem: we had to sit through the Meters - the opening act - but that hardly mattered.

But then, finally, the lights went down, and the spotlights, criss-crossing the venue, picked out the “flower stage” as Aaron Copland’s Fanfare for the Common Man blared out. Slowly, brilliantly, the ‘petals’ of the flower opened, and there was Mick clinging on to the top of one of the petals by his fingertips. As the flower unfolded, our eyes lighted upon Mick’s frilly stagewear - what the hell is he wearing? Light green, or maybe it was purple that night, all curls and folds, not the Mick I expected to see at all.

I needn’t have worried: next to him stood Keith, my absolute hero, black leather and Indian scarf, kicking the stage petal to the floor in his thick, soooo funky leather boots, the coolest - and hardest - man in rock and roll, no fucking question about it. And then, what joy, Keith launched into the glorious on-the-back-beat intro of **Honky Tonk Women**, a riff which, for me, epitomises the music of the Rolling Stones. Eleven years in the waiting and now, finally, the Stones and I were at one, in all senses: at the same place, at the same time, in the same stratosphere.

All the cliches you can think of summed up my feelings that moment: hairs on the back of the neck standing up, time standing still, I must have died and gone to heaven. We have all been there: for any Stones fan, it is a high to exceed anything achieved by narcotic or alcoholic substances. Even reflecting on that moment, more than a generation on, I can vividly recall that exact tingling sensation. Strangely enough, I recaptured that same feeling 19 years later at the Brixton Academy show, where, in a nice symmetry they opened with exactly the same song!

At that moment, Dave and I knew we had made the right decision. We were flying, and so, judging by all those around me, was the rest of the audience. And just for the record: the sound was absolutely perfect from where we were sitting. Mick described those Earls Court concerts as like playing in a toilet, and maybe it was for most of the audience, but, up in the Gods (literally), the sound was crystal clear.

Call me the what?

The rest of the concert passed in something of a blur. It was phenomenally exciting, of course. In those days - pre-Internet and news group and global information which means that everyone who wants to know about set lists can do at the click of a button - we had no idea what songs they would play and in what order, so you would get the buzz each time they started a new song. But it was all too much to take in. I do remember being mightily impressed with the lights: that was another advantage of being right at the back; you could get the whole effect perfectly.

The other problem was we had our eyes on the clock because we had to catch a train. Never have two songs by Billy Preston been quite so unwelcome, especially when we had to leave in the middle of Midnight Rambler. I knew we would get another chance on the following Thursday, but it was still torture to leave.

I remember much more of the Thursday concert, because we were right by the stage, Keith-side (where the sound was actually much worse). The wonderful Keith-Ronnie interplay on **You Can’t Always Get What you Want**, Mick charging around the circular stage during **Ain’t Too Proud to Beg**, the effortless groove of **Tumbling Dice**, a supremely funky **Midnight Rambler**,

my being mildly disappointed by the four songs from *Black and Blue*. But I do remember floating on air, and thinking how well the band played. Mick was even more of a sensational frontman than I had imagined, working the crowd, cracking jokes. The stage was great, too.

It is only subsequently, listening to bootleg recordings of those shows, that you can hear how sloppy some of the playing was, and how Mick was hardly singing at all, really just grunting - especially on the faster numbers.

It was a mad dash across London to get to Kings Cross, in time for the last train to Cambridge. Dave and I could hardly believe what we had just done. As the years have passed, that concert has stuck forever in my mind even though I have seen other much better concerts, by the Stones and by many others. Dave is no longer alive to share the memories with, having died tragically young in a car crash.

Time marches on: it must be a fair bet that this coming tour will be their last. I look forward to it with a mixture of excitement and trepidation. Just so long as they play Honky Tonk Women.....