

# Flashback

THE 1972 TOUR IS IN STONES' FOLKLORE THE TOUR TO END ALL TOURS. THEY WERE AT THE PEAK OF THEIR MUSICAL POWERS. THE CONCERTS WERE BITCHIN'. TWO MONTHS OF ROCK AND ROLL DECADENCE THAT SET THE STANDARD FOR EXCESS IN ROCK TOURING. IF YOU WENT TO A CONCERT ON THAT NOTORIOUS 1972 TOUR, YOU HAD SEEN EVERYTHING. WAS IT REALLY THAT GOOD? AND HOW DOES IT COMPARE WITH THE VOODOO LOUNGE TOUR? HUMPHREY KEENLYSIDE LOOKS BACK.

"A pretty wild tour. Girls. Drink. You name it. Rock and roll - even." Mick Jagger's verdict of the 1972 tour, the tour of the States that many herald as the band's finest ever. Even today that tour holds a special place for band and Stones aficionados alike. Two months when the band and audiences seemed to join together in unprecedented counter-culture, drugs-fuelled, rock and roll union.

The band were playing at their swaggering best, indisputably the world's greatest rock band and perfectly in tune with the mood of a changing America. For a generation that was fed up with the war in Vietnam and with growing corruption in high places (Nixon would be impeached within two years), yet wanted a harder edge to the dreamy peace-loving idealism of Woodstock, the Stones came storming to the rescue.

The tour not only yielded some of the most memorable concerts ever performed by the Stones but also set the benchmark for wild behaviour that other groups from Led Zeppelin to Guns 'n' Roses and Oasis have sought to emulate.

Mick for a long time reckoned - and may still do so - that the 1972 tour was the Stones tour to beat them all, the Stones at their zenith. If you were there not only did you see the Stones at their very peak but you saw the ultimate rock and roll concert.

Listening again to those shows, watching the film documentaries of the tour and reading Robert Greenfield's excellent chronicle of those two hectic months, *A Journey through America with the Rolling Stones*, you can see why the 1972 tour *does* deserve a special place in Rolling Stones history.

In May 1972, the Stones were riding the crest of a wave, at the climax of their most creative period that had produced their four greatest albums (five, if you include *Ya-Ya's*). Having put the last of those four, *Exile on Main Street*, to bed, the Stones set out to tour the States. But this time it was to be absolutely on their own terms. They were determined to lay to rest the bad memory of Altamont and to put on the sort of show that they - and not some halfwit promoter - decided was right.

Above all, no hassles from authorities on any score. From the ticket prices to the levels of security at the shows, the band's own people were to be in charge. After the busts of the 1960s, the Stones knew by then how to protect themselves from unwanted intrusions. Give or take the odd incident when Mick and Keith finished up temporarily in jail in Boston after Keith hit a photographer, that is what they achieved.

They rehearsed the set in Switzerland (for Keith's convenience, since that is where he was living with his family, recently expanded with the birth of a daughter). The stage, as always, would have something new, in this case giant mirrors placed above the stage so the band members would be back- as well as front-lit.

The sound equipment would be perfect: there were to be no repeats of the 1969 tour when amps blew up almost as a matter of course. And not forgetting an excellent support in Stevie Wonder, who must rank with the J. Geils Band as one of the Stones' most inspired choices of

support act.

By the time they hit the road, the Stones were really ready to roll. A well-oiled machine, engineered to the last detail by a restless Peter Rudge. The organisation was to be *professional*, no fuck-ups, no unwanted bad publicity.

Of course, it didn't quite work out that way. Organising rock tours in the early 1970s was still a pretty hit-and-miss affair. There were inevitable arguments with hotel managers, straight-laced lawyers on the make for clients with a grudge and - in a hangover from Altamont - very angry Hell's Angels.

Seen from the perspective of 1996, the organisation looks decidedly chaotic. Scraggy-haired, flared-trouserered hired hands negotiating landing rights for the Stones plane while rolling a joint on a hotel bed doesn't smack of great professionalism. But, hey, this was 1972, *maaaan*. It was a test of character, as Robert Greenfield so acutely writes, "to get loaded and go on functioning."

## LADIES AND GENTLEMEN . . .

None of this mattered as soon as the Stones hit the stage. Backstage and in the hotels, the scenes might have been alternately of debauchery, degeneracy and boredom. But as soon as Keith cranked up the opening power chords of **Brown Sugar**, all that counted was the music. And what a show! Ninety minutes of high-octane rock, delivered in the Stones' inimitable style.

They didn't so much play to, as assault the audience. With a short interlude for the slower songs - **You Can't Always Get What You Want**, **Love in Vain** and **Sweet Virginia** - the venues positively shook with the sound. You can see it in the way the band members stand on stage, their high-heel boots forcing them forwards at the knee and giving the impression of driving ahead.

The concert's stunning centrepiece was the magnificent **Midnight Rambler**. As Keith and Mick Taylor trade power chords and taut guitar lines, Mick does his belt-whipping act caught in a solitary spotlight. Eleven minutes plus of tension stretching to breaking point until the song's furious finale.

Richards and Taylor also used their brilliant guitar interplay to great effect on another extended masterpiece, **You Can't Always Get What You Want**, and on supercharged versions of **All Down the Line** and **Rocks Off**. Other high points of the set were their classic cover of Chuck Berry's **Bye Bye Johnny** - fired up by some vintage Richards soloing - and Mick and Keith head-to-head on one microphone roaring through **Happy**.

Some of the set didn't work quite so well. **Gimme Shelter** was given the fast rock treatment, losing the dramatic impact of one of Keith's most sinewy and glorious riffs. By competing with the guitars, the horns cluttered up **Love in Vain**, and even then Mick Taylor never quite again pulled off his magnificent *Ya-Yas* lonesome train whistle whine solo. And no Stones concert can ever be perfect without **Honky Tonk Women** in the set, which surfaced just twice during the tour, once as an encore.

The band gave it everything they had plus a little bit more. Over two months they packed in over 40 concerts, sometimes two a night, and - if the books and films of that tour give an accurate portrayal - indulged themselves to their hearts' content in other physically draining activities. Staying in the Playboy Mansion. Flying in their own plane. Chucking TVs from hotel balconies. Whatever they fancied. A rock and roll lifestyle that may be commonplace now, but then was wonderfully outrageous.

The image, too, was perfect for the time. All satin, scarves and glitter, setting the trend for countless bands in their wake including Aerosmith, Dogs D'Amour and - much later - The Black Crowes. Keith's thatch had a streak of tint that Robert Greenfield wrote made him look like a golden rooster.

(Even though, much later, both Glimmer Twins claimed to be rather embarrassed by their then appearance. Shortly before the 1994 tour Mick told *Q* magazine: "I reckon the worst time was when I was sticking all that stuff on my face. Stick a load of glittery stars on your cheeks. At the time you're thinking, that really looks brilliant!" Keith agreed: "I can't believe I went

around with half a tooth for six years. I didn't give a shit.”)

Playing hard, living hard. Mercifully, there were no calamities - but it was a close-run thing. In the drug-soaked hip days of the early 1970s, there was the added frisson for the audience that at any moment Keith might collapse on stage. ‘Hey, man, outta sight! Keith just passed out!’ In retrospect, Keith admitted he was sailing close to the wind. “I did a lot of shows when I was completely out of my brains. One show was just like another, and it was like a tunnel that got smaller and smaller.”

## PAYING THE PRICE

Afterwards the Stones were to pay a high price for the excesses of the 1972 tour. What followed was five years of less than productive studio work, Keith's near-fatal (musically, that is) drug dependency, and the departure of Mick Taylor. It took Ronnie Wood's arrival to get them back on track and even then the momentum was lost again for most of the 1980s as Mick and Keith fell out.

By then we had entered the era of the stadium shows where seeing the Stones live became a completely different experience - a development which upset a lot of people. As the audiences got bigger, so the emphasis was less on the music and more on staging an eye-catching show. The bigger the better seemed to be the prevailing philosophy: the Lotus flower stage in 1975/76; the stadium-width stage and cherry pickers in 1981/1982; the gigantic lost city steel structure in 1989/1990. All great sets, but hardly conducive to showing off the band's real strength.

Not that the music was completely forgotten. The Tattoo You tour was an attempt to combine the big show with back to basics music, but a lot of the music was *too* scrappy and under-rehearsed. The Steel Wheels tour went to the opposite extreme: all the rough edges polished to a sheen and the songs even timed to the last second. The overall impression - especially for anyone seeing several shows - was of seeing videos of the greatest hits.

## RECALLING A GOLDEN ERA

Some people at that point gave up on the Stones. But, as we all know, you should *never* give up on the Stones. The omens were good with the release of *Voodoo Lounge*, their most immediate-sounding album in years, recalling the power and versatility of the late '60s/early '70s golden era. Probably encouraged by co-producer Don Was, the Stones consciously went out to recapture the spirit and sound of their most vital period.

That was translated into the live set. During the course of the tour all but one of the *Let it Bleed* tracks and about half of *Exile* were played live. The similarity between *Voodoo Lounge* and *Exile* was highlighted with songs like *Rocks Off* and *All Down the Line* juxtaposed with *Sparks Will Fly* and *You Got Me Rocking*, which Keith commented was quite deliberate.

There were several parallels between '72 and '94. In a neatly symmetrical way, *Brown Sugar* opened the show in 1972/73 and closed it in 1994/95. The acoustic set, last done in 1972, was revived half way through the North American leg of the *Voodoo Lounge* tour. There seemed to be a willingness to throw into the set odd or one-off numbers (such as **Don't Lie to Me**, **Loving Cup** and the medley with Stevie Wonder of **Uptight/Satisfaction**), a practice which was only fully established during the *Voodoo Lounge* tour. The presence of faithful old Bobby Keys. And perhaps for the very straightforward reason that the band had not played that well *as a band* since 1972.

The '72 concerts pulsed with what Robert Greenfield called “mystical electric energy” flowing from band to audience. And for many people that is the key similarity between 1972 and 1994. The Stones got back in touch with their audiences.

Some things, of course, went for good: Mick Taylor's effortlessly fluid guitar lines, played without grimaces and rock star poses that Ronnie can't quite manage to keep under control; and Keith's wonderful high nasal voice that years of Jack Daniels and cigarettes have turned into a raspy growl.

The days of debauchery are probably over as well. Fast forward 20 years from the early '70s and it is hard to imagine the band indulging in such excesses with wives, children and even grandchildren in tow. You are more likely to find Keith and Ronnie shooting a game of pool than lobbing TV sets from hotel balconies.

We can't be sure, though, because the days of full and frank documentaries with the cameras rolling all the time have also long gone - probably because of the *Cocksucker Blues* film. The Stones were so appalled they said they were never ever going to release the film or let anyone else do anything similar again.

Even Robert Greenfield's book got the thumbs-down. Mick later said: "I recall him [Greenfield] being on only four or five of the dates. What actually happened was that he got to see a lot of the rushes from *Cocksucker Blues* and wrote it from there, which is ridiculous because there he is writing with supposedly great authority about almost every juncture of the tour."

The Stones never made the same mistakes again. The band's publicity is now meticulously controlled, pre-produced videos, recorded interviews et al. That is just the sign of the times. So 1972 was, in more ways than one, the end of an era.

## **'AVING A GOOD TIME**

In the end, of course, you can't really compare the two tours: different times, different audiences, a different mindset. The whole thing is now on a vastly bigger scale, the light show is, well, light years apart, and the technology is now immeasurably more sophisticated.

And, of course, in 1994/95 the Stones played to millions and not just thousands of people for a tour that stretched over 13 months. The irony is that in 1972 the Stones were anxious that they should not always play big halls, which is why they insisted on performing at the 4,500-capacity Hollywood Palladium. Nowadays, an audience of 20,000 is considered a small show (excepting, of course, the club gigs)!

The 1972 tour made US\$3 million, considered to be a fortune. The Voodoo Lounge will have grossed maybe 100 times as much, including ticket sales and merchandising.

But the Stones have always had an uncanny knack of moving with the times while still staying true to their roots. Mick said as much shortly after the 1972 tour: "Maybe the reason why the Stones are still going is because we've always been sufficiently aware of what's going on to be influenced, but not so that we slavishly follow trends." He could say much the same thing now. And so they have - for the most part - kept their core fans, while picking up many new ones on the way.

When you go to a Stones concert you are partly going to see a band for what it was - nostalgia is a very powerful drawing force and the Stones recognise that. You are also going to see the Stones for what they are *now*, and what they stand for is over 30 years of achievement. Above all, going to a Stones concert is still the ultimate experience in "aving a good time".

## **YOU CAN'T ALWAYS GET ....**

The 1972 tour was undoubtedly special, a roller-coaster ride that gave everyone associated with it a real high. But did the Stones lose it after the 1972 tour, as Barney Hoskyns of *Mojo* magazine and other critics would have us believe? Of course not!

These days you might not get the same *experience*. The object of the exercise then was to go to a Stones concert stoned out of your mind: that was the ethos of the 1970s. The band could be off-key, out of time and out of tune for all the fans cared, it was still FAR OUT, man!

My contention is that you actually get a better *show* now than then. You get more songs for a start. We are treated to a better and more varied set - the Stones didn't stop recording great songs after *Exile*. The opening half a dozen numbers on any given Voodoo Lounge concert, culminating with a blistering version of Satisfaction, give the shows a launching pad that is as exciting as anything they have ever done.

Anyone fortunate enough to have seen the Stones at one of the club gigs will also know that, without the distractions of the huge stage show, they can still raise the roof. (Incidentally,

Hoskyns couldn't be bothered to go the Brixton Academy gig - there's no pleasing some people!)

In 1972 the Stones were unquestionably the "greatest rock 'n' roll band in the world". Now, they are rock and roll's elder statesmen, looking benevolently on the young groups emerging and content to have come through over three decades fitter and arguably better musicians than ever. The flame of intensity may have dimmed a little these days, but the old boys can still whip up a storm. What more do you need?