

Review: O2, London, 29 November 2012

THIS REALLY IS THE LAST TIME

Well, it had to end some time. After nigh on 50 years worshipping the band (I was not there right from the very beginning), 20 or so shows, and of course working for the fan club, I am calling it a day for the Stones. Not the music, of course. That will go on for ever. So much of my life is associated with the music, the good times and the bad, the highs and lows, the magic, the disappointments. The soundtrack to my life, as for many others.

No, I resolved that the O2 show in London would be the last time. Part of it is because the 'live' experience is no longer what it was. For too many people, going to a live gig is just another night out. "Rock and roll tourists", as Chris Robinson of The Black Crowes (another of my favourite bands) derisively – and accurately – called them. At a Springsteen concert last year in Hyde Park, six blokes in front of us spent the entire concert talking to one another (when one of them wasn't pushing past to go and buy more beers). It completely wrecked the show for me.

Then, there are the ticket prices – which seem to get more and more expensive each year. I forked out hundreds of pounds for the Stones tickets, and they were not even particularly good seats. (Actually, by mistake we sat in the wrong seats, which were pretty good, until we were turfed out.) I figured this was going to be a treat, the Stones' 50th anniversary concerts, near Christmas and indoors. But this was a one-off.

I suppose going to a Stones concert, after seeing them quite a few times (obviously not so many times as pure Stones fanatics,) does not have the same adrenaline rush that it once did. Still great, obviously, but the highs are not as high as they once were. The shows are also somewhat predictable. You know which songs will make up three-quarters of the show, just probably in a different order. They have to play those songs – the war horses – I know, but there is really only so many times one can listen to Jumpin' Jack Flash. Keith always says that it varies from show to show, but you could fool me and I listen very hard.

Mick as good as admitted that, for the forthcoming shows, they are not going to bother with new songs. People come for their favourites and they will deliver. The Stones have never been a band for improvising or going off on tangents, but you can't help but contrast them with Springsteen, who has around 200 songs from which he selects each night, as well as taking requests from the audience. He still plays the favourites, but the shows stay fresh.

I may be being over-harsh. The Stones have tried web votes, and asking for requests in advance, and they are caught in a bind. If they don't play the favourites, the punters will complain (especially at those ticket prices). But all I am saying is that there is not enough variation.

ON WITH THE SHOW

OK, enough of the preamble. What about the concert? I had chosen to go to the second of the London concerts. I figured they would have ironed out any problems. Good decision: Eric Clapton was the guest guitarist and did a sterling job on Champagne & Reefer. The sound was excellent, the staging (based around the tongue and lips logo) perfect, and the big screen well used (I could have done without the pre-show celebrity gushing, though – who cares whether Johnny Depp thinks they are the "greatest rock and roll band").

On the plus side: it was a great idea to start off with a string of 1960s' hits (Get off of my Cloud, I Wanna be your Man, The Last Time, Paint it Black, Gimme Shelter). Ronnie's playing was back to his very best. The two new songs (Doom and Gloom and One Last Shot) were excellent, and fitted in perfectly. The video for Honky Tonk Women was very funny. Brown Sugar, Start Me Up and Tumbling Dice weren't played too fast (Keith hit exactly the right tempos (tempi?)). The choirs that reproduced the note-perfect introduction to You Can't Always Get what you Want was a brilliant touch. Keith was concentrating more on his playing and less on showboating. And, of course, Mick was completely mesmerising – his voice was on, his movements lithe, his introductions funny, his control over the audience absolute. You just marvel at the guy. There truly is no better front man.

On the minus side: Florence (of Florence and the Machine) over-singing her part on Gimme Shelter. A rather stumbling version of Lady Jane, although the acoustic guitars sounded nice. I may be sticking my neck out here, but I didn't think Mick Taylor really added anything to Midnight Rambler. His playing has lost its fluency, and he was certainly too loud. By contrast, Keith nailed his part. But it was a nice touch to invite both him and Bill Wyman back on stage. The biggest minus for me (and I have been saying this for a while) is that, while Keith may be able to manage the rhythm parts, his solo-ing is now almost unlistenable. I am not sure if it is what he hears in his head or the fact that his fingers cannot respond to what he wants to play, but his lead lines bear little relation to the song, and definitely have no fluency. He stabs a few notes at a time, and that is it. I say this with huge regret: I have idolised Keith for decades, and yield to no one in my admiration of his guitar playing. How could you not, with those peerless riffs. Just the other day, I was reminded of how brilliantly he wove together all the guitar parts on Mean Offender.

I also feel that Keith has less of interest to say these days. Where once he always came up with something off the wall, now he just appears off his head. In truth, maybe he really does not have anything more to add. His book, *Life*, was completely brilliant, especially his exposition of his early years in post-war Dartford and the foundations of the band. It summarised everything that is great about Keith, but I felt on closing it that it was the end of the book and the closing of a chapter on a period of my own life. The Stones have meant so much to me, and their music always will, but I no longer need to follow their every movement and listen to their every utterance. Crossfire Hurricane was, in that respect, something of a disappointment.

Anyway, back to the concert. It was a great show to end on. I shall follow the current tour with some interest. Part of me is curious to see how they manage Glastonbury and Hyde Park (twice), but not enough to fork out any more money. Take me to the station and put me on a train, I've got no expectations to pass through here again.... – *Humphrey Keenlyside*