

12th October 1997: Philadelphia

"IT STILL SMELLS THE SAME; IT'S GOOD TO BE BACK." SO QUOTH KEITH RICHARDS TO THE AUDIENCE AT THE VETERANS STADIUM IN PHILADELPHIA. WITH EACH TOUR, THE STONES COME NEARER TO ACHIEVING THE ULTIMATE GOAL, MAKING A STADIUM CONCERT FEEL LIKE A CLUB GIG. GEORGE BARNER ROCKS ALL NIGHT LONG.

The Bridges to Babylon tour reached Philadelphia on the 12th October, the 9th show of the year-plus long haul that will take the Stones to all four corners of the globe. Would all the glitches have been fixed? Would the bridge that was supposed to come out from the main stage to a tiny stage in the centre be ready? Would Philadelphia's power supply be enough to cope with the wattage generated by the world's greatest rock and roll band? (When they opened here in 1981, the power blew, and the show was stopped while they fixed it.) In the end, everything turned out mighty fine.

After Blues Traveller had finished their set - and they did a nice job - we had to wait half an hour before the lights go down and the stage lights go up. Loud noise, lights flashing, swirling colours on the giant video screen, a blast of fire and smoke and then there's Keith, complete in full length leopard skin coat, ripping into the Satisfaction riff. Mick is on a riser, stage left, wearing a white jacket with a blue and red scarf. He looks great. The sound is sharp (the band apparently invested US\$5 million on the sound system), and balanced, but I would prefer the guitars a little louder. Next up is It's Only Rock 'n Roll, no horns, or back-up singers yet, just the Stones rocking. The full band comprises exactly the same team as the Voodoo Lounge Tour, plus Blondie Chaplin on back-up vocals.

Mick: "Here's one called Flip The Switch". This song sounds great in concert, fully vindicating the decision to give it such a prominent slot in the set. Chuck Leavell pounds out the intro to Let's Spend the Night Together. This is the first time I have heard it started out on piano in concert, as originally recorded. This isn't the 1981/2 version; this baby is cooking.

And the great songs just keep coming: Gimme Shelter may be Keith's riff, played now on his red Gibson ES-335, but this is rapidly becoming Lisa Fischer's song as her soaring vocal sends chills down my spine. No wonder this proved to be the fan's regular favourite on the web site. Mick is strutting, dancing and singing his ass off. I realise I am out of breath already. Mick then gets an acoustic guitar and dons a long black leather coat. He starts Sister Morphine and I just about fall over. It is just

beautiful, Ronnie easily mastering Ry Cooder's original slide lines. Next up is Anybody Seen My Baby?, which sounds very different done live. Mick and Bernard do the Biz Markie rap and it smokes.

What follows is a real treat for Stones fans: 19th Nervous Breakdown hits us like a runaway train. I've never seen the Stones rock this hard before. Out of Control follows that and my favourite song from the new album becomes a favourite live song, much longer than the album cut and full of twists and turns. Some people have even compared it to Midnight Rambler. Mick's mirror shirt reflects the flashing white lights. Kent Smith of the New West Horns produces a nice, jazzy muted trumpet solo, Ron follows with some tasty wah-wah guitar, then Mick does a killer harp solo.

After that, we get one of the new tricks of the Bridges show - the web site poll for the favoured song. The winner is Memory Motel (played for the second time on the tour). Mick changes yet again, this time into a long, white coat and sits at the piano. He fluffs the intro and has to start again. Ron again plays some nice wah-wah guitar. Keith changes his line to, "She's got a mind of a fool and she use it mighty, mighty fine, yeah", which produces great cheers.

Mick grabs a red and white Stratocaster and plays the weirdest intro to Miss You that I have ever heard. You hardly know which song it is (a bit like the long, rambling intro the band did to Satisfaction in the 1969 tour - keep everybody guessing). The object of the attentions of the gorgeous Lisa Fischer was - lucky guy! - Darryl Jones, but he just kept on playing. This is the audience participation song and the crowd didn't disappoint - "I bet they heard you in New York," Mick says.

Then follows the ritual of the band introductions: guess who gets the loudest applause? Yes, of course, Charlie. Keith is last, steps up centre stage and says, "How are you doing, Philadelphia?" Loud applause. "It smells the same." Keith laughs; the crowd is not quite so sure. He then does a wonderful version of All About You, not usually one of my favourite songs of his (I am coming round to ranking Thief In the Night as my favourite Keith song), but tonight I love it. Full of emotion and lovely.

Then he rips into I Wanna Hold You. Now, there's a thing, an almost forgotten song which barely made an impact on Under Cover and here it is blasting Philadelphia's 50,000 plus audience. The stage lights go down, the Emotional Rescue thermal pictures are shown on the big video screen, the PA roars and a bridge telescopes out of the big stage to a tiny stage in the middle of the stadium. Now, that's more like it. The Stones suddenly transported back to Ealing.

They troop across to the centre stage, Charlie leading the way followed by Mick, Ron, Darryl, Keith and Chuck. They kick into Little Queenie, complete with Richards' killer Chuck Berry licks. Next up is Crazy Mama,

with Mick on third guitar, and Ron does the slide part with typical aplomb. Then comes *The Last Time*, radically different from the 1965 single, with very different vocal phrasings. Watch out for this one on live recordings. Mick does his best James Brown steps while the band rocks on and we are really getting to the heart of the Stones.

Shame that it is only three songs before the distinctive drum/conga pattern of *Sympathy for the Devil* sees Mick, now in a multi-colour coat, dancing his way back to the main stage. Keith's lead break sounds good! I have gotten so used to him butchering what should be an absolutely sacrosanct solo that I am open-mouthed in wonder. Hats off to you, Keith. But what's with the big eyeball on the video screen? Then we are into the greatest hits package, much loved by the occasional concert goers, but by common consensus not the favoured section of the show for Stones devotees.

But at least it is a great selection: *Tumblin' Dice*, *Honky Tonk Women*, *Start Me Up* and *Jumping Jack Flash*. I have long wondered why they still bother to churn out these old war horses, but they really seem to enjoy it and the entire crowd is singing along. There is really nothing like it, hearing 50,000 people singing along to *Jumping Jack Flash*, and that's why the stadium shows are actually really good fun. Added to that, the songs seems to have a harder edge to them: the Stones may be granddads but I defy any band to rock harder than them.

As well as rocking it up, another endearing characteristic of the Stones is that they are quite likely to cock it up as well, and sure enough Keith comes running on for the encore and completely blows the opening riff of *Brown Sugar*. Maybe that is what happens when you have played the songs 5,000 times and counting. But by the time of the second verse they are back on track and the crowd is going wild. More smoke, lots of bows and the two and a quarter hour show is over. Phew! What a band!

What can you say about Mick? He remains an incredible performer and he gave us everything, which was all the more impressive given that he had flu. Keith seems to have gotten his chops back. Ronnie looks the part and, speaking as one who always preferred Mick Taylor's lead lines, I have to say that Woody really does fit in far better. Charlie is just Charlie - he's good tonight, inn'e? The horns and the back-up vocalists are used far more sparingly so what we hear is the true Stones sound. They have absolutely nothing to be ashamed of and about playing at their age - long may they continue! They are showing the world how to let this thing called rock 'n roll can grow up.