

Sawdust Memories

SITTING ON A SHELF GATHERING DUST AND CONTROVERSY FOR YEARS - DECADES! - THE ROLLING STONES ROCK AND ROLL CIRCUS LOOKED AS THOUGH IT WOULD NEVER SEE THE LIGHT OF DAY. BUT, NOW IT HAS, AND *SHATTERED!* WENT ALONG BOTH TO AN EXCLUSIVE PREVIEW SCREENING AND TO THE UK LAUNCH.

“The Rolling Stones Rock and Roll Circus is a time capsule if ever there was one because here, as if found in a bottle washed up on the beach, are two classic days in December 1968 that in many ways capture the enthusiasms, aspirations and communal spirit of an entire era.”

So writes David Dalton of *Rolling Stone* Magazine in his excellent essay to accompany the long-awaited release of the Rolling Stones *Rock and Roll Circus*. And few could put it better, for the first impression you get watching the hour-long film made by Michael Lindsay-Hogg, is to look back in time, to a *better* time. Confined in the circus environment, it is as if the Stones, the rest of the bands and the acrobats created their own world beneath the canvas and on top of the sawdust.

The time capsule metaphor is given added weight when at the very end of the show, Mick looks straight into the camera as he changes the words of **Salt of the Earth**, the closing number, to, “Do we all look real to you, do we look too strange?”

Actually, they don't look strange, so much as childlike. Everybody is dressed up in circus costumes, with Mick as the Ringmaster and the audience garbed in primary colour cloaks (or, as Jools Holland, introducing the launch screening, described them, like “mediaeval simpletons”).

The stills we have known so well for so many years have finally sprung to life in all their colour and splendour. The freshness of the then just newly released *Beggars Banquet* and the yet to come *Let It Bleed* albums shines through the Rolling Stones' live set including “first-night mistakes”, which add to this charming, yet high-calibre performance.

There was evidently a lot of hanging around and by the time the Stones finished their set nearly 24 hours after the whole show had begun everybody (except we imagine Keith!) was worn out.

A good vintage

Was it worth the wait? Most definitely yes. The reason usually given for the film's confinement to dusty shelves is that the Stones were not happy with their performance. “Some things get better with age - like me,” said Keith. But they are being harsh on themselves. The Stones' performance is by no means faultless, but that wasn't the point. It was always meant to be a rough and ready show. As David Dalton points out, they were never sure which acts were going to play when.

Fresh from the set of *Performance*, Mick projects his Turner alter ego into the ring, brimming with self-confidence and displaying a satanic twist to direct the circus and giving it the bite it needs. He flirts with the camera, jokes with the audience, pisses about with John Lennon, always in complete control. His musical performance is evil, electric, energetic and downright excellent. This is the way the Turner character must have been like before becoming a recluse!

Imperfections aside, what *Rock and Roll Circus* does show is the Stones at the end of one era and about to embark on an even richer time. Just look at the two key players in this transition: Brian Jones, so out of it that the most he is entrusted to do is to add some shaky slide guitar on **No Expectations**. (But we should not be too tough on him: he was apparently playing with a broken wrist.) Sad to see such a great musician underused: as Mick sings, “Our love is like our music /It's here and then it's gone.”

And then there's Keith, in full command, barefoot and flared-trousered, bobbing out to the new rhythms which were flowing through his body. Brian is practically asleep and Keith is a man

on the move.

This gives the band an entirely different sound. The **Jumping Jack Flash** riff, taken at a nice easy pace, is pared down and all the better for it. In the vastness of football stadiums with lights blazing and Mick leaping, it is easy to forget just what a great riff it is. Played by Keith on his standard-tuned Gibson and not on his open-tuned Fender, the riff has a nice throaty, rumbling sound.

Parachute Woman is far funkier than on the studio version, Keith and Charlie locked into a tight groove. This proves once again that the Stones are ultimately a (rhythm and) blues band. Blues chords, harmonica and honky tonk piano - that's the Stones at their best.

Or take the samba beat tapped out by Charlie and bongo player Rocky Dijon in the opening bars of **Sympathy for the Devil**. It is great to hear it so close. You want the Rolling Stones stripped? This is it!

“Dirty, John, Dirty”

It is a great show. The Who do not, contrary to the myths that have built up over the last quarter century, fully upstage the Stones. But it is a close-run thing. John Lennon leads The Dirty Mac, the supergroup, through a raucous **Yer Blues**, which on its own justifies buying the CD. Bill Wyman complained that Keith usurped him by playing bass, but watch Keith moving the song forward with his melodic bass playing and you can see why Keith's decision was absolutely right. It is also of great value to hear Eric Clapton tearing into the John Lennon riff shortly after the demise of Cream.

There is a definite sense of change. The Beatles were on the verge of breaking up, John Lennon was moving into his Yoko era, Mitch Mitchell wouldn't be playing with Jimi Hendrix much longer, Eric Clapton was in between bands. And especially, Brian Jones would be dead within the year.

The liner notes on the CD justly “remember” those not around to hear the finished version: Brian Jones, Jesse Ed Davis, Keith Moon, Nicky Hopkins, Ian Stewart and Jimmy Miller, as well as the irreplaceable John Lennon.

Marianne Faithfull looks self-conscious, desperately trying to keep up her girl-next-door-image while her voice already betrays her more exuberant, experimental lifestyle. The Yoko Ono wailing will probably not stand repeated listenings except for Björk fans!

All of this is enhanced by a truly excellent sound. If only such care and attention had been paid to the Abkco/London CD re-releases.....But there is now talk of a further re-release, this time of the UK albums on CD and let's hope they do a proper job on the sound and the packaging this time.

The camera work is outstanding: Michael Lindsay-Hogg's direction focuses on the players and complements their rousing performances superbly. We get Keith Moon up close sweating and grinning, Ian Anderson's wild-eyed grimacing, Keith mouthing the words to **You Can't Always Get What You Want** behind Mick, fully aware of the masterpiece they have just created.

The images are constantly tuned into the music which creates just the right fast pace of a circus performance. The well-preserved technicolour adds to the festive mood.

Which just leaves one question: Why have the Stones after all this time agreed to the release? They may have been influenced by the current market trend to release second-bests and outtakes. The Beatles Anthologies I and II, a vast compilation of rehearsals and outtakes, have sold 13 million copies, for example. They must be thinking that they could do the same with some of their discarded material. Or maybe they just felt that after all these years there was no harm in releasing it. Whatever the reason, it was the right decision: it is good to have Rock and Roll Circus out in the public domain.