

Between the Buttons

Between the Buttons and Their Satanic Majesties Request capture The Rolling Stones in transit, the red-hot R&B-cum-ace singles band somewhere in between the long spell on the road and their re-entry in 1968 as the elder statesmen of raunch and the 'greatest rock 'n roll band in the world'. Mick and Keith have both virtually disowned 'Buttons' whilst Stones biographer Philip Norman described it as having a "curiously limp echoing effect, like a vaudeville show in a near empty hall". Rock critic Roy Carr went one step further calling it a "turkey".

But they're wrong, of course. 'Buttons' remains one of my favourite Stones albums, not least because it contains two of my all-time Top 12 Stones songs - Connection and Complicated. (The others? Since you ask: I'm a King Bee, 19th Nervous Breakdown, Under My Thumb, 2000 Light Years from Home, Parachute Woman, Gimme Shelter, Silver Train, She Was Hot, Had it With You and Mixed Emotions.)

It's an album full of suburban sex melodies dripping with musical whimsy and quirky turnarounds, funny beginnings and even funnier endings. You can't see the roots for the blossom. It is essentially a pop album and a damned good one at that. Viewed now in the glorious certainty of hindsight, what then may have seemed poorly produced holds up astoundingly well under today's critical ear.

Much of the blame at the time was laid on Andrew Oldham and perhaps there was a grain of truth in this. Keith: "Oldham was so influenced by Phil Spector that anything was possible if you put enough echo on it." In many ways Oldham was a throwback to the Colonel Tom Parker syndrome, the circus barker and con man. He may have projected an image for the Stones but didn't seem to care about their musical development.

Five of the tracks were recorded in August 1966 following a US tour, with an upfront mix of bass, drums and keyboards, and scarcely a guitar in sight. The remaining seven tracks were taped at London's Olympic studios in November/December at the end of yet another British tour. Jack Nitzsche was recruited for some piano and harpsichord, in addition to the regular six Stones (including, of course, Stu).

TRACK BY TRACK

Side One kicks off with Yesterday's Papers in which Mick callously downgrades his discarded girlfriend Chrissie Shrimpton to the level of waste paper. This was the only track from the Buttons album that the Stones played on the 1967 spring tour of Europe. Mick's studied attitude of outrage and depravity has always wandered pretty close to the edge as My Obsession clearly demonstrates. "My mouth is soaking wet/I think I blew it now" leaves little to the imagination. Ian Stewart supplies piano fills on this one. Back Street Girl contains yet more brutal chauvinism - "Don't try to ride on my horse/you're rather common and coarse anyway/don't want you part of my world/just you be my back street girl". The incongruous setting of an acoustic ballad complete with Parisienne accordion, set against misogynist lyrics was nonetheless one of the album's high points.

Connection is one of the cleanest, tightest rock songs ever recorded. Rolling Stone journal Jon Landau called it the "drier than ice sound". The band played the song on Sunday Night at the Palladium, the infamous show where they refused to take part in the corny end of show wave to the audience. The song remained in mothballs until Keith aired it with the X-Pensive Winos and then sung it from time to time on the Voodoo Lounge tour.

She Smiled Sweetly captures the Stones in tender mood and features Keith on organ. This track was an odd choice for their appearance in early February of that year on the Eamonn Andrews Show. This was the night when Mick announced he would be suing the News of the World for libellous remarks about his possession of drugs. Retribution was swift. The Redlands bust came one week later and the band were well and truly thrown off course handling the bust and its fallout for most of the rest of the year.

Between the Buttons lacked Aftermath's unity of style, using more varied arrangements. The catalyst for such diversions was Brian Jones, whose talent for mastering and adapting almost any instrument that happened to be around was given full rein. He put the sitar and kazoo to colourful use on Cool, Calm and Collected. The song's bouncy piano and Mick's nursery rhyme lyrics delivered in a mannered English mode were a nod in the direction of the music hall. Perhaps it was this track more than any other which

prompted Roy Carr to dismiss the album as a "bunch of Kinks outtakes".

On to Side Two and All Sold Out which finds Mick on the offensive again: "Never seen a mind so tangled/a girl so strangled/your mind has just jumped the tracks." The chauvinistic tone of his lyrics were undoubtedly influenced by the new social milieu into which the Stones had swept - the swinging London of debutantes, artists and photographers. As Brian supplied the musical seasoning, Keith continued to advance his basic rhythm technique. With its primitive Bo Diddley beat and distorted guitar Please Go Home was a perfect example of the jagged, flashy urbanised form of R&B which the Stones had developed a year earlier with songs like Mother's Little Helper and 19th Nervous Breakdown.

Bob Dylan once remarked that he could have written Satisfaction but doubted whether the Stones could have come up with Mr Tambourine Man. Who's Been Sleeping Here? is arguably the closest Mick came to playing Dylan at his own game in what is a vastly underrated track. Mick's blossoming romance with Marianne Faithfull was the inspiration behind Complicated, a brilliant number which really ought to be tried out live. Once again drums, bass and keyboards dominate the mix. The Stones were now rubbing shoulders with London's upper crust, models and rich spoiled rats - "she's the darling of the discotheque crowd/of her lineage she's rightfully proud". Miss Amanda Jones is more or less a filler and for me the only low point of the album.

In the four years since their formation, the Stones had gradually scaled their assault on staid, middle-class values. Veiled allusions to drugs and discontent in earlier songs like Paint It Black and Doncha Bother Me gradually evaporated until the meaning was quite obvious in Something Happened to Me Yesterday. This closing number offered aberrant items such as Keith on lead vocals for part of the verses (the first time he had sung lead), Brian on saxophone and trombone, and some facetious road safety advice from Mick delivered in true Dixon of Dock Green fashion (a hugely popular TV soap about the police force in the 1960s for those of you outside the UK).

The Stones' indistinct transition from pop to destinations unstated was mirrored perfectly in Gered Mankowitz's vaseline-smearred lens, the sinisterly simple sleeve with the buttons on Charlie's coat acting as cat's eyes capturing the very essence of he

band. Snapped on Primrose Hill in London on a bleak winter dawn, the Stones had never looked more hollow-cheeked and unappealing.

It was no surprise that a few years or so ago Oasis, also seeking to move into new musical territory, went for the identical don't-give-a-shit image by using that very same location and the same photographer for a shot which they used on the cover of Mojo magazine. But there, of course, the comparison ends... - *John MacGillivray*