

A BIG ENOUGH BANG

New Stones albums these days don't come round that often as it's no longer a yearly event as it used to be in the '70s. The last studio album, *Bridges To Babylon*, blasted out of my CD player for the very first time back in 1997, a whopping eight years ago! And now the time has come for a batch of spanking new riffmanship to fuel another tour, no doubt yet another "live" album and possibly another special product release, as a brand new Stones long player is sitting on my desk once more. Older, wiser perhaps, but definitely weathered in first-time listening sessions to brand new Stones studio albums, I contemplate how to go about this little box containing 'A Bigger Bang' and an intriguing picture of the boys which according to my wife is inspired by an 18th century painting of a science lesson. How apt. ...Bang!

SOME BIGGER BANG GIRLS

Since I have heard through the grapevine that the preliminary press on the new album likened it to the classic 'Some Girls' LP, I cast my mind back to those heady days of those *Miss You*-nights and how I'd grown to rate that collection of songs as one of the best ever to have been slipped into a sleeve. I guess we all know by now that Rolling Stones albums need a bit of time to grow on you. Like the Stones cut and mould their songs in various takes, for us it takes a turn or 10 to fully appreciate the strength of their final product. That no doubt explains why the general music press reviewers who have to get through tons of CDs a week don't get the time, and as a result, don't seem to get the full crux of Stonemanship as it is today after a pretty good run of over a 40 years.

Besides that, the Stones being at the forefront of their trade, towing the line for all rockers out there, are for some reason still expected to come up with pretty much a groundbreaking record en par with the band's '68-'72 long-playing canon. No-one knocks John Lee, Jerry Lee or the Blind Boys of Alabama, who have pitched their art yonks back and are generally accepted to play in that framework but, according to many, the Stones still seem to be needing to deliver something new, rather than olds, borroweds and blues which in fact is how they started out as. Heck, the Stones got their rock wings; let them flutter about happily, singing their

songs and pitching their trademark tunes without often unreal expectations of musical innovation that really happened in the first decade of their career.

In 2005 and with 'A Bigger Bang', I feel we can by now safely say that there are no more Stones Holy Grails (and we had a few!). The first album and the '60s singles years, 'Beggars Banquet', 'Let It Bleed', 'Sticky Fingers', 'Exile on Main Street' and 'Some Girls' kinda sum it up. We should accept by now that this is what the band is all about. There'll be no earth-shattering surprises, breaking social barriers and setting trends like the albums of the '60s and '70s.

What there'll be, however, will be a celebration of a well tried and tested formula which encompasses all music of the world in time and space according to the Rolling Stones, including the occasional pleasant surprise like the anti-gospel of *Saint Of Me*, the epic *Out Of Control* and the electronic approach in *Might As Well Get Juiced* on the previous one, then before that, *Moon Is Up* with Charlie bashing away in a stairwell, the mesmerising *Continental Drift* and Keith on bicycle wheel...to name a few. The Stones do always add at least a few pleasant surprises to their new collection.

So...how to go about treating myself to this brand new album for eight years? Sixteen-odd songs on this one must make for a few fillers, I guess, so I listen out for the new age classics. I play the CD for the very first time when I'm doing some paper work on a Sunday afternoon. Not listening too intently as I rummage through my notes, the album kicks off nicely with a familiar sound, indeed in the vein of the late '70s glory that is the 'Some Girls' album; familiar, but not surprising. My opinion remains unchanged during the first few songs and then it happens; my attention gets diverted and my ears prick up. I sit up, grab pen and paper and start scribbling my review. This is track four: *Rain Fall Down*. As a listener I have now arrived – this is a true Rolling Stones classic. And that's how I got into the album. Then listening more intently to the disc as I played it over and over again over the subsequent days, skipping the odd too uneventful tracks,

I have now arrived at the final verdict. Yes, of course there are fillers on 'A Bigger Bang' but that's the CD era for you – value for money dictates the equivalent of a double record but the real art of double album-making lies in the old LP format of the sides 1, 2, 3 and 4 very much being separate units and then there's the first and second LP on top of that, so

that concept is lost forever where CDs are concerned. Instead, we have to manage to digest this 16-tracker in one big go and pick out the best bits. So here goes...

Rain Fall Down: The one that caught my ear. *Dance* meets *Terrifying* with a smattering of *Fingerprint File* without the angst. A great prolonged groove that should turn the stage red when played live. Solid Stones well worked out!

Streets Of Love: The first single off the album. I'd say, say no more. An excellent song and an excellent choice. A classic sounding familiar tune, surprisingly pleasant. The song is set in a popular Stones frame, but with Mick's soft multi-voiced falsetto approach backed by some excellent supporting vocals whilst underpinned by Keith's acoustic pickings and Charlie's snares, this simply does it! Who needs the noughties when we can sit back and reminisce with the Stones in smooth '70s style. And that's the strength of the best tracks on 'A Bigger Bang'; the band sounds fully in control, in superb form - sounding as if they went straight to tape - and totally confident in visiting their arcade of previously tried-out styles and ideas.

She Saw Me Comingis the next marker where nice surprises are concerned and it's a pleasant, rootsy sounding "odd-one-out" with the guitars laying down a bit of *Crackin' Up* reggae as done at the old El Mocambo back in '77. Definitely 'Some Girls'-y, maybe 'Exile', with an infectious enthusiasm that comes across beautifully. You can imagine the fans singing along, so a probable live classic. The band certainly sound like they're enjoying it! The song is perfectly followed by another great one: **Biggest Mistake**, an accomplished quirky tune with Mick rolling the words eloquently off that famous tongue of his. Is there such a thing as "talking rock"? To put it quite simply: a lovely song.

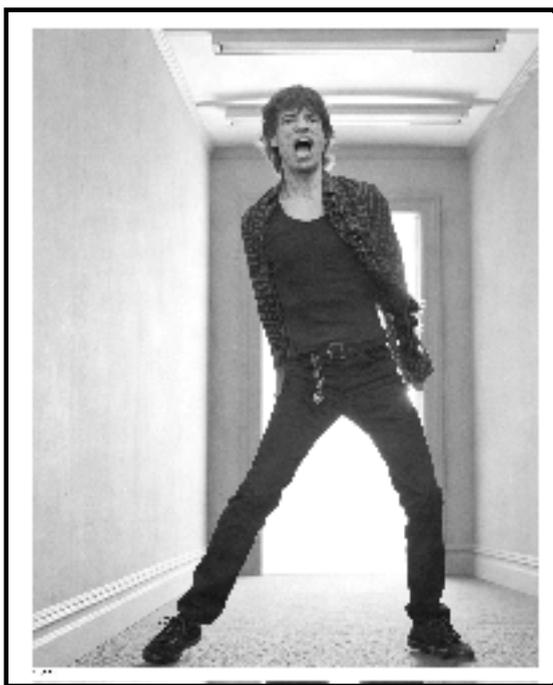
Skip one and go to **Oh No, Not You Again** and the album is in full swing. *A Respectable/Lies* for these times, rocking and rambling on in classic Stones punk-style with Mick mouthing off and having a go at some missus, the old vitriol bleeding through the speakers. Reminiscent of the 'Some Girls' outtake *Yellow Cab*. A modern classic!

Dangerous Beauty is next and sees the band very much in Keith's Winos mode with the guitar section chopping away solidly as well as laying down some nice solo touches. Mick joins the gang effortlessly and delivers a strong vocal performance, blending beautifully in the pounding groove sounding well in control of the pack. Wonderfully layered, paced and arranged – this is top Stones listening!

Back to the beginning and **Rough Justice**, the B-side to the first single, drives up a strong Faces-style chassis supporting a full-on classic Stones model with Mick firmly at the wheel, confidently leading the pack going rowdy in the back seat. Ronnie sounds like he's well in his element!

Let Me Down Slow has Mick's voice up front in the mix, controlling this lazy stroll down the corridor of chords, quite literally going down in key, but - sadly - also in lyrics. This is not what we expect from the man who brought us *Sympathy for the Devil*. Yet, the tune (which I guess is Mick's), is still pleasant enough and pleasantly accompanied by Keith's familiar guitar accents and Ronnie's trusted slide.

It Won't Take Long: "And It won't take long to forget you", sings Mick. "It'll all be over in a minute". If he's on about this track, I'll agree. It's way too familiar in an album filling way. Charlie's heavy beat, the equally heavy Richards /Wood guitar touches and solos at the end grant the track some solid credibility but all in all too reminiscent of album fillers from the 1980s such as *Too Tough*. The song proves to be more charming towards the end, but is too unconvincing for gaining classic Stones status.



Back Of My Hand offers a seemingly traditional blues workout but it sounds a tad *too* arranged, not quite dirty or spontaneous enough. The band serves up a Robert Johnson/Exile and Muddy Waters/*Mannish Boy*-style blues concoction, harmonica'd by Mick *Midnight Rambler*-style. You can see where they're coming from, but it sho' ain't no classic! **This Place Is Empty**: Maybe this place, track 9, should have stayed empty on the CD as Keith pours out a well-known and sounding lament once more. Yes, it's welcome to Keith's place and he does what he's very good at very well, but it's starting to become too familiar, I'm afraid. And this introduces a real lull in the album.

Laugh, I Nearly Died and **Sweet Neo Con** musically tap into a similar vein, building on the Steel Wheels sound, but are both trying too hard to please and in some way it just doesn't seem to work. The former kind of saves the day with Mick's heartfelt, almost falsetto, vocal pleading, the guitars bubbling under nicely and a tribal-sounding use of background vocals towards the end but the latter has no excuse whatsoever. The lyrics are simply dire and don't bring any message home if it's indeed a *High Wire*-style attack on the Bush presidency. Funny how Mick so successfully and subtly observed politics through *Sympathy for the Devil*, *Street Fighting Man* and *Sweet Black Angel* but now seems to have lost his touch. C'mon Mick, hit me with some superb subtlety instead!

Things only get worse with **Look What The Cat Dragged In** when INXS meets *Under Cover of the Night*. Bags of enthusiasm and a decent guitar solo at the very end only just saves this one from being, indeed, something the cat may have dragged in. And it didn't move... **Driving Too Fast** too doesn't deliver at all and is neither a non-starter nor finisher. Sounds pretty bad, eh? Sorry, it is. Highly predictable and unusually non-eventful, this song simply has got nothing going for it and should be dismissed by the time you finish reading this review. Honestly. And the irony is that those two tracks could have been substituted by the two 'bonus' tracks on the DVD, which would have definitely raised the stakes. **Under the Radar**, a *Child of the Moon* meets *Dangerous Beauty*, showcases the band perfectly, with Keith's understated rhythm allowing Ronnie full rein on some magnificent slide. Great Mick lyric, too: "I'll be sneaking in under the radar/I'll be creeping under your nose". I bet you will. Sir Mick. **We Don't Wanna Go Home**, while weaker lyrically, is another

great rollicking tune, with three guitars, ‘Some Girls’-style, interlocking to great effect, and an excellent middle eight.

Then the final tune of the album: **Infamy** and I simply love it to bits. We’re wrapping up on a positive note and my ears are most pleasantly surprised by the first truly quite modern-sounding Keith song ever, kicking off with a fat juicy synth loop, a steady clockwork beat ‘n’ tambourine combo and a harp weaving in ‘n’ out. What a truly eclectic mix of sounds and beats old and new with Keith confidently doin’ his thing as he does solo-style, with back-ups sounding like the Winos. It works well and Keith has truly redeemed his vocal-leading input on this one!

So here we are: another Stones album. Most good, some great and a few “erm” moments. But, as I said before, the CD-era has a lot to answer for. Bring back the LP format anytime. It enhances the musical product as it’s presented in smaller portions, don’t mind the crackles! Less is more. Just imagine how a boiled-down 10 track single LP-style version of ‘A Bigger Bang’ would make a most classic Stones album. If only they’d leave the ‘multitude of tracks’-format to the compilation market.

