



Flashback

The Basement Album

18 SONGS, FOUR SINGLE-SIDED LPs, THE BAND'S ONLY PROPER STUDIO DOUBLE ALBUM AND, ACCORDING TO MANY CRITICS AND COMMENTATORS, THE BEST RECORD THEY EVER MADE. BUT WHAT IS THE FAN'S VIEW OF EXILE ON MAIN STREET? JOHN MACGILLIVRAY PUTS ON THE HEADPHONES.

Is the enigmatic *Exile on Main Street* a misunderstood masterpiece or the fall from grace that rock critics suspected at the time? Having listened to the album only once and forced into snap judgements many writers at the time registered disappointment at the music's blurred edges and indecipherable lyrics. I have to admit that I was one of the doubters also until I hauled *Exile* out again four years later and the full impact hit home, and I haven't stopped playing it since.

It is, as NME journo Nick Kent wrote in 1974, "the quintessential Stones album, a no bones about it rock 'magnum opus', so much so that when *Exile* was thrust upon us we couldn't even recognise it." Interviewed in 1976 the late Ian Stewart described *Exile* as his favourite Stones album, and most Stones fans I know are of the same opinion. The 18 songs cover all aspects of popular music - rock, blues, country, soul, even calypso. As Mick said on *Exile's* release, "It's like four single-sided albums, with something for everyone."

The band was really hot . .

It was the summer of 1971. The Stones had decamped to the south of France (for tax reasons), a tour of America was scheduled for the following year, and they were under pressure from Atlantic Records for something special to counteract the flood of inferior compilations Decca were releasing (*Milestones*, *Stone Age* (the cover of which the band completely disowned in newspaper ads), and *Rock 'n' Rolling Stones*). Despite occasional setbacks like the Stones' chef blowing up the kitchen, Anita setting fire to the bed and thieves making off with most of Keith's treasured guitar collection, the Stones delivered a classic.

Recorded in Keith's Nellcôte Villa basement under the working title 'Tropical Disease' the cramped conditions (Nicky Hopkins and piano sat in a separate cubby hole) somehow enhanced the overall character of the album. *Exile* is the Stones at their most dense and impenetrable with Mick's voice buried way down in the mix. Keith's sinister, brooding presence permeates the album, and all four sides bear the undeniable imprint of his personal and musical character. The guitar interplay is the

real key with Keith's taut rhythm chording providing the perfect foil for Mick Taylor's diamond-cutter lead guitar. The rest of the band hook themselves around the two guitarists, packed in tightly for almost claustrophobic intensity. It's as if the physical confines of the Nellcôte cellar had somehow been transmitted onto vinyl. Even today, transferred to CD, *Exile* retains its primitive basement appeal.

The Stones celebrated 10 years in the business by regaining much of their early ruggedness with *Exile* which offers a more authentic, compelling insight into that particular underworld than the contrived and sometimes facile postures of its predecessor *Sticky Fingers* (still a great album, though!). Lyrically, Mick distances himself from the decadent posing and leering sexual bravado of *Sticky Fingers* and approaches his subject matter with down-to-earth honesty and frankness.

What is Mick singing?

The album kicks off with one of Keith's patented guitar scratchings on **Rocks Off** - "zipping through the days at lightning speed/plug in, flush out, fight the lucky feed (or, according to some ears, "plug in, flush out, fight 'n' fucking feed") - then veers into the spin dizzy rushes of **Rip This Joint**. With Stu bashing the piano, Bobby Keys' blistering sax and Bill Plummer's mazy runs on the upright bass, this track is without doubt one of the most spontaneous and uninhibited moments to have been captured on record.

Bill Wyman is curiously absent on many of the tracks, with Keith and Mick Taylor sharing the bass duties (with Keith particularly impressive on **Casino Boogie**). Slim Harpo's **Hip Shake** mounts up as another plus, whilst Casino Boogie sounds strangely like a '70s remake of the chord progression from 1965's Spider and the Fly. Many of *Exile*'s songs make the most of a riff, steering clear of melodic flamboyance, as is the case with **Tumbling Dice**, which only reached no. 5 in the UK singles charts. Brown Sugar, Honky Tonk Women and Jumpin' Jack Flash, all number ones, were a hard act to follow, it has to be said. Many years later, Andy Johns, who assisted with engineering, revealed that the excellent drums on the song's coda were actually played by Jimmy Miller because Charlie had a "mental block" - so now we know!

Keith's infatuation with country music comes to the fore in **Sweet Virginia**, a Gram Parsons-inspired lazy shuffle which tends to get hung on the over-emphasised "shit" in the round-the-campfire chorus (on which Parsons actually sang). **Torn and Frayed** is autobiographical, commenting on the wasted condition of Keith (disguised as "Joe") - "Joe's got a cough/Sounds kinda rough/Yeah, and the codeine to fix it/Doctor prescribes, drug store supplies/Who's gonna help him to kick it?" Excellent steel guitar was added later by Al Perkins in LA (who was then one of Stephen Stills' Manassas backing band, for whom Bill Wyman also did some sessions).

Next up is **Sweet Black Angel**, an acoustic paean to black activist Angela Davis; I distinctly recall this B-side of Tumbling Dice being a jukebox favourite in my hometown. **Loving Cup** dates back to the *Let it Bleed* sessions and was first performed at Hyde Park in July 1969. And these four songs made up the "stripped" side of the

album. (A somewhat frustrated Mick, goaded by some of the criticisms the album attracted on its release, said at the time, "We put together a side you can listen to late at night and people say, 'yes, but it hasn't got a hard-out rocker on it!'")

And the great songs keep coming

Side 3 for me is the best organised of any on *Exile*, opening with Keith's **Happy**, which is the closest to a pop single on the album (and one of Keith's best ever vocal performances) featuring producer Jimmy Miller on drums. Roy Carr, then of New Musical Express, interviewed Keith at the time of the album's release and commented how similar his and Mick's singing styles were. "That's the Dartford accent," Keith replied.

Turd on the Run, with Keith's jangly Maybellene rhythm guitar and Mick's blueswailing harmonica, is a great little hustler of a song - "Gave you diamonds/You gave me disease". Barbed lines like these appear out of the mix at every turn. **Ventilator Blues** offers yet more frightening glimpses of hedonistic decay - "when your spine is cracking/and your hands they shake". **Just Wanna See His Face** features a Dr John-influenced Voodoo incantation with Mick and the chorus sinuously wavering around a collection of jungle drums. The final 2:52 length of the song was edited from a much longer version. As Keith told Roy Carr: "We just chopped the most interesting part out of it and threw away the rest." Had *Exile* been a single album then this little gem would have ended up in the vaults. Thankfully, it didn't, for, as James Hector points out in his excellent review of all the Stones music to date, it's in the margins that *Exile*'s true greatness lies.

Lyrical and melodically **Let it Loose** is a classic in the mould of Memory Motel with Charlie's drumming and Mick's vocal performances making this track my particular favourite, and the gospel backing vocals from Clyde King and Vanetta Fields towards the end of the song are simply breathtaking.

All Down the Line is a straight up no-nonsense rocker, which also originated from 1969 sessions and was a popular live number throughout the '70s. Mick blows a mean harmonica once again on **Stop Breaking Down**, an old Robert Johnson blues converted into a foot-tapper featuring scintillating slide from Mick Taylor.

Shine A Light is another disturbing vignette with the unforgettable opening line - "Saw you stretched out in Room 10-09" - and it was great to see this number resurrected (largely at the fans' instigation) on the Voodoo Lounge tour. **Soul Survivor** seals the bottle - "It's a graveyard watch/Running right on the rocks/I've taken all of the knocks". And did anyone notice that the opening riff of the coda was lifted directly by Michael Jackson in Black or White? **Soul Survivor** defiantly announces that the Stones intend to survive, no matter what.

With *Exile* in the bag, the band headed off on what many regard as their best tour ever, the '72 tour of the States. In those days, two months was considered a long tour. Keith told Roy Carr: "A tour of America is so arduous that it knocks you on your heels for the

rest of the year....but I am sure we'd like to get back together again in the autumn and tour England. The trouble is that people expect too much from bands like us." That was said more than a quarter of a century ago!

With *Exile on Main Street* the Stones reached the zenith of their damaged vision where they walk to the edge and cast a doleful eye over the trail of human wreckage incurred from all the partying. From pissing against a garage wall, to the nervous breakdowns, drug busts and court cases it had all been great fun. They just don't make them like this any more.

VINYL EXILE

ALBUM

Exile on Main Street

COC 69100

Rolling Stones Records/WEA

UK

- Released 12th May 1972
- 16 weeks in the charts
- Highest position: No 1

Exile on Main Street

COC 2-2900

Rolling Stones Records/Atlantic

USA

- Released 12th May 1972
- 17 weeks in the charts
- Highest position: No 1

▶ Both versions of the album come in a cardboard fold out album cover, ditto inner sleeves and with 12 picture postcards telling the fall from Exile on Main Street!

▶ The deluxe packaging was ingeniously repeated for the collector's edition of the CD on the Virgin label in 1994

▶ Cover art design by Mr Cocksucker Blues himself, Robert Frank

▶ Produced by Jimmy Miller. Sound engineers, Glyn and Andy Johns. Recorded in Keith's basement at Villa Nellcôte in Villefranche-sur-Mer, France between 10th July and late July, and 14th October and 23rd November 1971

▶ Loving Cup was first attempted at the London Olympic Studios between 30th May and 2nd July 1969 with a first and only public appearance during the Hyde Park concert on 5th July of that year

▶ A steaming acoustic version of All Down the Line emerged from the 1969 October

session at L.A.'s Sunset Sound studios

▶ Tumbling Dice was first tried out with a slightly different arrangement and different lyrics as Good Time Woman during the 17th-31st October Olympic Sessions in 1970. Also first takes of Shake Your Hips, Shine a Light, Stop Breaking Down and Sweet Virginia (without the backing vocal) were done

▶ The uptempo rocker Travellin' Man was also recorded at the Nellcôte sessions but never made it onto the album

▶ In the first half of 1972, the Exile takes were remixed and overdubbed by Miller at the LA Sunset Sound Studio. At the same time Mick recorded his Exile on Main Street Blues as featured on the NME flexisingle (see singles section)

▶ The value of a mint original copy of Exile on Main Street lies around the £20 mark if the postcards are still there. If not, it's £15, guv!

▶ Reissues without the fold out cover (On the EMI, CBS or Columbia label) are valued at around £8

SINGLES

UK

Tumbling Dice/Sweet Black Angel
Rolling Stones Records RS19103

- Released 14th April 1972
- 8 weeks in the charts
- Highest Position: No 5

▶ Packaged in open tongue/mouth custom Rolling Stones sleeve, yellow Rolling Stones label with dice and red tongue logo

▶ Quite common, value £4

Exile on Main Street flexisingle

Side A: Mick Jagger with piano accompaniment introduces excerpts from forthcoming double album, featuring All Down the Line, Tumbling Dice, Shine a Light and Happy

Side B: New releases by Curved Air and Fanny

▶ This flexidisc was a great stunt with Mick on piano shuffling his way through 'Exile On Main Street/it's a strange street to walk down'. It incorporates song titles in the lyrics and stops at the various snippets of tracks, offering the lucky NME readers a taste of what was to come

▶ If you still have the flexidisc *with* the copy of the NME, then it'll be worth around £8, according to *Record Collector*. But many will disagree and claim a higher rarity status and price around the £15-20 mark. The single on its own is worth around £5, but the price is on the

increase as copies become rarer and rarer

USA

Tumbling Dice/Sweet Black Angel

Rolling Stones Records RS19103

- released 14th April 1972
- 9 weeks in the charts
- Highest position: No 7

- ▶ Same sleeve and label design as the UK 7"

- ▶ Tumbling Dice is recorded in mono!

- ▶ Expect to pay £4-5

- ▶ The reissue, which lacks the Side One/Two printing on the label is quite interesting having the stereo version of Tumbling Dice on it while the label still claims mono. Price £3-4

- ▶ American being promo paradise, there's of course a blue white labelled little bugger of Tumbling Dice around with a stereo version on side one and the mono on side two. Expect to pay £8-10

Happy/All Down the Line

Rolling Stones Records RS19104

- Released June 1972
- 4 weeks in the charts
- Highest position: No 22

- ▶ Comes packaged in a custom Rolling Stones tongue and mouth designed sleeve, yellow label with red logo

- ▶ Just as Sway is a different take on the American b-side of Wild Horses, so Happy's flipside of All Down the Line differs from the album version by having an additional eight seconds! The single will fetch around £6-8

- ▶ The reissue, missing the side one/side two printing on the label has the album version of All Down the Line and is therefore a bit cheaper, at about a fiver

- ▶ Promo! Promo! Two of 'em even: the original one, just as the official release with the side one/two printing and the second issue without that information, both on b/w Rolling Stones labels. They are equally rare, though, at around £10-12