

Flip The Switch

STEVE BAKER TAKES A KNIFE TO THE LATER ALBUMS, CUTS OUT SOME DROSS, REORGANISES AND - HEY PRESTO! - COMES UP WITH THREE GENUINELY EXCELLENT STONES ALBUMS.

Reviewing Bruce Springsteen's "Tracks" outtakes box set for *Q* magazine, David Hepworth pointed to the difference between *inspiration* and *perspiration*. This, he said, was the difference between the tracks that made the albums and those that remained on the cutting room floor.

Like *Q* magazine, the CD arrived in the 1980s. LPs with five songs a side were replaced by sprawling collections of up to 15 tracks. Album playing times went up from 40 minutes to an hour. Had the average recording artiste magically become 50% more creative overnight?? No..... and neither had the Stones.

STEEL WHEELS

Steel Wheels, the band's first album aimed at the new format, tends to be dismissed as a cynical "some new songs for the tour" venture. I think it's a lot better than that; its reputation has suffered because of a couple of weak songs and the abandonment of the 'two sides of five tracks' formula. The albums that contain the Stones' strongest songs (*Beggars' Banquet*, *Let it Bleed* and *Sticky Fingers*) stick more or less to this structure.

I believe the albums from '89 onwards are vastly improved by chucking out the filler and listening as if to two sides of an LP. So set your CD players to 'Program' and follow me through my 'Wheels', with less sweat and more steel:

Side One	Side Two
Mixed Emotions	Rock and a Hard Place
Hearts For Sale	Almost Hear You Sigh
Terrifying	Continental Drift
Can't Be Seen	Break the Spell
Blinded By Love	Slipping Away

Missing the cut are and why are:

Sad Sad Sad

.....THIS HAD TO GO. It's an embarrassment. Even Jagger admits it was an attempt to sound like the Rolling Stones. They'd recorded the rest and then Mick decided they needed a 'typical Stones rocker'. Played live, it was a horrendous come down after the rousing Start Me Up. What *is* all that about elephants in the bedroom?

Hold on to Your Hat

Surely a contender for worst Stones song ever, it sounds like Iron Maiden trying to play rockabilly. There is no way in a zillion years that this would have made it onto an LP, but you can squeeze more music onto a CD, so there it is. Squawking heavy metal guitars were the worst feature of some solo Jagger recordings; letting them

loose on a Stones record should be a treasonable offence. And so to Side One, with some :

Mixed Emotions.

An arresting rocker with that gets straight to the heart of the Stones' situation in 1989. Like almost all Stones rockers since, *Mixed Emotions* starts with drums, a nod to Charlie's pivotal role in the band. There is something about the way that snare drums cracks along as the groove gets deeper and the band begin to really swing about two-thirds of the way in that puts a lump in my throat. The engine that had spluttered throughout the '80s was now purring with relaxed power and some grace!

Hearts for Sale

Plenty to like about this one: careful guitar work with few wasted notes, enjoyably *careless* backing vocals and the band is cooking, all pushing in the same direction. Close your eyes and you can just see Charlie, head slightly cocked, eyebrows raised and that half smile on his lips.....I wonder if Jerry realised that Mick was describing the state of his marriage? He 'lost his willpower' plenty of times before she lost her patience!

Terrifying

.....showcases the band playing well, doing what they do best - taking a simple riff and turning it into something interesting. The percussion works sympathetically with Charlie's drumming, the muted trumpet adds colour and the riff pulses along with plenty of zip underneath.

Can't Be Seen

"They set us up so they can shoot us down" - that's a great, melodic middle eight with lyrics that recall 'Connection'. Keith has devoted time and energy in latter years to integrating backing vocals fully into his songs. *Can't Be Seen* is a good example. "You're married anyway-oh shit" is a corny moment that is carried off by the good humour of Keith's performance and the sheer enthusiasm of the track. The tempo of my new *Steel Wheels* is quickening, track by track until:

Blinded By Love

... which glides gracefully down river, just like the Queen of the Nile it

describes. Although *Terrifying* hinted at bestiality and 'Blinded' is so stately that it boasts a literary editor in the credits (one Chris Jagger) the tracks *are* similar, in that they are both very simple songs made hugely enjoyable by exquisite arrangements.

As the needle winds gently to the middle of the vinyl. I have to stop myself getting up to turn the record over!

Side Two:

Rock and a Hard Place

A thumping rocker to kick-start the second side. Originally an instrumental called 'Steel Wheels', it became a standout track. Funny how some of the endless riffs the Stones have recorded spring to life and some don't. (Munich Hilton anyone?). Compare and contrast with Party Doll; Mick seemed to have a thing about church spires in the late '80s...

Almost Hear You Sigh

More prominent in the I Got The Blues position, second side, second track. Maybe a little on the sparse side (as was Out of Tears, I prefer my Stones ballads on the elaborate side, like Blinded by Love) but the song is strong and Mick sings it well. Apparently Keith hated Mick changing "I can feel your lips on mine" to "I can feel your tongue on mine" but Mick was right; the image is more memorable. The acoustic guitar is pretty too, especially the solo. Mick had presumably tired of Keith's defiantly yobbish picking (check out those 80s' live versions of Angie or You Can't Always Get What You Want, Keith's plectrum apparently replaced by a broken bottle). With a co-writing credit for X-Pensive Wino, Steve Jordan, this is Keith's best ballad since Beast of Burden.

Continental Drift

Now instead of being lost somewhere near the end of a CD, this underrated epic is in the coveted Sister Morphine position, centrestage on the second side of the album. If they'd called it 'Speed of Light' we'd still be talking about it as a classic; somehow the oblique title and the sheer length of the CD obscured its impact. *The Sun* newspaper, which raved about the album, said that this was the one "dodgy" track, "the sort of thing you might expect to hear at a curry house", which definitely says more about *The Sun* than it does about the Stones.

Break the Spell

... is an intense blues; back to basics after the previous track's flight of fancy. There's a claustrophobic tone that racks up the tension and some razor-sharp harmonica. In the Paul Jones narrated BBC Radio 2 documentary from 1999 Charlie talks about how hard it is to play the drums in a way that is both quiet and intense. This is an excellent example of your favourite racehorse owner doing just that.

Slipping Away

... faces up to middle age gracefully, with another lovely middle eight, lyrics that seem to come from Keith's real experience and a gorgeous fade to black.

So there's my Steel Wheels, in sharper focus, devoid of the screaming self-parodies and with each track greatly enhanced by its place in a clear album pattern.

VOODOO LOUNGE

This is a little trickier. I've been strict with myself and limited the record to five songs a side. So some semi-decent stuff has to go, but it's the overall effect of the record that I'm concerned with.. It's well known that the band spent hours on funk numbers that Don Was vetoed; the compromised CD that emerged started well but became a blur of jarring gear changes as it rambled on. This apparently had something to do with the move from basic track laying in Dublin to the polishing stage in the US.

Side One
Love is Strong
You Got me Rocking
New Faces
Moon is Up
Thru and Thru

Side Two
Out of Tears
I Go Wild
The Worst
Brand New Car
Sweethearts Together

Most of my rejects are from the chaotic second half:

Blinded by Rainbows

Noticeably a favourite with those fans for whom English is a second language; toe-curlingly trite lyrics and a hackneyed melody. Awful. How could Undercover of the Night be so savvy and this so naïve?

Suck on the Jugular

Hmmm..... Why not go back to 'Come on Sugar' which at least has one or two hooks. "Let's get together and f*** all night" ? Ooh Mick, you are *naughty*.

Mean Disposition

A b side if ever I heard one. I like the rather jaunty feel but if room can't be found for The Storm why include this? On the other hand, its omission from the double vinyl seems perverse. What a mess that 2 LP set was!

Sparks Will Fly

Cavia, not champagne. Plenty of fizz can you recall the flavour once it's gone?

Baby Break it Down

Why, why, why is this strong tune given such a half-hearted performance? The opening chords are sooooo sluggish and the tempo is flat. Some of the outtakes are almost rescued by extra soulful backing vocals but really, this song hugely underachieves.

Here's my more intimate 'Voodoo Lounge':

Side One

Love is Strong

...retains pride of place. Anyone who has heard the outtake with Keith on vocals knows just how good a singer Mick Jagger is. He brings a focus and purpose to a track that otherwise meanders along. The backing vocals make the song work, rising like smoke rings. I rather like the remix that is all over the CDRom too. One fun note: listen to Mick sing "My mind is ripped" (2:44)....sounds *exactly* like Rolf Harris!

You Got Me Rocking

Apparently Mick hated this at first and Keith could barely get him to sing it. Now he wants to sing it every gig! It thumps along merrily and the riff reminds one of earlier triumphs, even if the song doesn't quite match them.

New Faces

Instead of the diminishing returns of another fast number, we now have a complete change of tone and it works! Mick's resigned ode to his daughter is an ironic

admission that the 'devil' is getting his due. Turn up your speakers and hear Mick count the harpsichord in. I loved the Stones Regency Buck period (Backstreet Girl, Sittin on a Fence) and this is a welcome throwback. I don't understand the accusations that Voodoo Lounge was too much in thrall to 'Exile'; New Faces recalls a very different era.

Moon Is Up

What a great arrangement! I first heard Voodoo Lounge in a record shop the day before it was released. I came in on this track and didn't recognise the Stones at all; and in an era with some Stones-by-numbers moments I mean that as a compliment. Charlie plays a dustbin in a stairwell and gets a unique sound!

Thru and Thru

An inspired choice by the producers of 'The Sopranos' who made the song famous by using it to underline Tony's decline into a moral black hole, Thru and Thru's appeal is its thunderous gospel-soaked climax. My only regret is the ...er.... 'singing' at the song's opening. In the early '80s Keith recognised that his nasal upper register had gone forever (along with the nose that produced it) and developed a throaty purr instead. Early parts of Thru and Thru are an ill-advised attempt to scale those former heights. Still, it does end Side One in a passionate, rousing fashion. According to Keith, 'Slash' of Guns and Roses was hanging in the studio when Keith was listening to the playback. Inspired, he offered to add some bluesy lead guitar. Keith's reply? "Listen son, you're a good kid, but you ain't comin' within a million miles of my f***** track!"

Side Two

Out of Tears

Placed here to emphasise the strength of the song. The arrangement isn't the most imaginative but it is a striking tune so let it shine here in pole position. Ronnie turns in a very nice solo.

I Go Wild

Poor Charlie, still smarting from his encounter with Steve Lillywhite on *Dirty Work* now had Don Was telling him how to tighten his skins. This tune rocks but it never quite swings and the drums (that sound like someone assaulting a wheelie bin with a cricket bat) don't help. Apologies to my European friends, who don't have wheelie bins or cricket bats handy. Insert your own comparison! Still, the riff is a good'un and its all enjoyably raucous!

The Worst

Well, the title does tempt fate, but luckily it's one of the album's best songs. I love the sound effects on the fade that take us right back to *Satanic Majesties*. If anything, this album reminds me of *Between the Buttons* where the songs weren't classics but the sheer variety kept the listener engaged.

Brand New Car

From the nostalgic '60s' coda of The Worst, we pull out into the fast lane of '70s' sleaze. It sounds great here between two ballads. I'm not usually one of those 'Mick Taylor We Miss You' bores, but a fluent, stinging solo would have gone down well

at this point. Shame they didn't keep Keith's backing vocals that can be heard on an outtake!

Sweethearts Together

Mick and Keith should duet more often, as it seems to inhibit Mick from slipping into Jamaican patois, Texan drawl or fake cockney. This Tex-Mex treat is the best thing on the record, an ode-to-each-other that ties the album up beautifully. If only 'Voodoo Lounge' ended here. It would rightly have been hailed a return to form.

BRIDGES TO BABYLON

Bridges to Babylon was regarded as a genuine return to form in some circles - and with justification. Saint of Me and Out of Control were highlights of the live shows on the Babylon tour and you'd have to go back to Start Me Up for the last new Stones number to be so well received in concert.

Yet, maddeningly, the same inability to self-edit surfaces again. The record is transparently two solo albums welded together but the songwriting is so good and the room is recorded so well that this scarcely matters. Still, there are some rejects:

Anybody Seen My Baby?

Through the '70s and early '80s the Stones could stay atop the trends, reflecting changes in popular music and adding their own twist. I think this song shows how the antennae are failing. Jagger cannot and should not try to compete with Craig David. Dance music has developed into something the Stones cannot hope to copy (and let's face it, we wouldn't want them to. I mean....."when the crowd say bo selecta"Huh?????!'). ASMB is a mistaken attempt to keep up. Plus it's a weak tune that must have sold millions of hot dogs while it remained in the B2B live set.

Too Tight

Lacks the tune of Out of Control or the tension of Lowdown. Too Tight nips along brightly but it adds nothing to the record. Typical of the kind of cut they'd have left off a 40-minute, 10-track album.

Always Suffering

Keith didn't bother to be diplomatic about this one. "Maybe Mick thinks *he's* always suffering (laughs)" was his reaction. Stones country was always ragged, some grit in the ointment and some shit on the shoes. Always Suffering is just sooo smooth; those airbrushed harmonies are not what the Stones are meant to sound like and I can't imagine why Mick doesn't see that?

So B2B is a much easier album to reformat:

Side One

Flip the Switch
Lowdown
Already Over Me
Gunface
You Don't Have to Mean It

Side Two

Out of Control
Saint of Me
Might as Well Get Juiced
Thief in the Night
How Can I Stop?

Flip the Switch

Yes I did say the *room* is well recorded. Listen to those drums kick in and you can hear the entire room burst into life; this is a living, breathing rock and roll band. The lyrics are fresh (“three black eyes and a busted nose”) and somehow manage to be topical: Early in 1997 a religious sect in the USA committed mass suicide, in the apparent belief that they were to be beamed up to a spacecraft piloted by their prophet. What do you think the police found when they discovered the bodies? You guessed it: shaving kits, turkey and stuffing too!

Lowdown

Keith has often been described as the ‘Human Riff’. If, instead of passing away, Keith were to somehow one day dissolve into musical form, would the result not sound like ‘Lowdown’? Keith once listed the ingredients of rock and roll as “rhythm, tension and energy” and this track scores on all three points. The drums, backing vocals and the horns and guitars crank up a spine-tingling mix.

Already Over Me

A song that boasts some of Keith and Ronnie’s most effective ‘weaving’ in recent years. These tasty guitar licks distract pleasingly from a rather over-egged vocal. The strongest traditional Stones ballad on the album.

Gunface

Charlie says this reminds him of Howlin’ Wolf. It reminds me of *Dirty Work*, preferring to give the listener a bloody nose than persuade him to dance. A tough, bragging vocal and a good mixture of tried and trusted blues riffs with modern production values.

You Don’t Have to Mean It

Funny how the Glimmer twins roles have shifted. Mick has become much more macho in recent years as he sensibly abandons the androgyny of old. And here, just after we’ve been dragged up a back alley and mugged by a gun-toting Mick, here is Keith to bring out the sunshine and pass round the Malibu! A great reggae track, ending side one in upbeat fashion.

Out of Control

You can talk all you like about ‘Papa was a Rolling Stone’ and recycled bass lines but this is a bloody good song. It’s the sort of track some thought the band couldn’t produce any more; more than that it’s the stuff we want more of when the new album surfaces. It was thrilling live (and, damn it, yes, I did enjoy the light show that accompanied it!) and the extended workout taking the song home was the highlight of *No Security*.

Saint of Me

This has to be song number one on your ‘Stones tracks without Keith’ compilations! A whiff of the old black magic, a defiant lyric and a chorus you can sing along with. What more do you want?

Might as Well Get Juiced

This one's more of a challenge isn't it. I admire this one more than I enjoy it to be honest, but I'm working on it. Like Continental Drift on *Steel Wheels*, I find that placing the track in the middle of side two somehow helps me to get to grips with it. Maybe I'm mad? Or maybe it's easier to dismiss tracks when they come at you in an endless succession. I guess if I listened to more 'modern' music I'd know whom this is meant to sound like. To this pair of ears the megaphone vocal is reminiscent of recent Tom Waits albums.

Thief in the Night

Mick called this the more 'waffly' of the two Keith songs that close side two. I don't know if Keith has heard that (or if he cares). One of the sexiest songs Keith has written, 'Thief' has a nagging, insistent groove and those built in backing vocals are again a structural element. The lyrics add to the 'Babylon' theme. (Perhaps we should have had 40 thieves as well as 40 licks?)

How Can I Stop?

How Can I Sum This Up? If you don't love this like it's your own baby you must be deaf. The most moving, musical, *impressive* piece the Stones have recorded for a bloody long time. Just go and listen to it if you don't agree. Or if you do! One reviewer said the band should have cut off the last two tracks. Who employs these people??

The news on the chat rooms from those who claim to be outsiders is that Mick and Keith are writing together again 'for the first time in years'. This bodes very well for the new record, because if there is one message to be gleaned from my trawl through these recent albums, it's that the Glimmer Twins shine brightest when they work together. We are in the long shadows of the band's Indian Summer but if these 'Sweethearts' can bear to stay 'Together' for one more record at least, the results might still surprise a few people.