

Album review

Some Girls, some album

IT STARTED OFF BEING CALLED 'MORE FAST NUMBERS', WAS RONNIE'S FIRST ALBUM PROPER AND MARKED THE RETURN OF KEITH INTO THE BAND AFTER 10 YEARS IN THE DRUGS' WILDERNESS. 'SOME GIRLS' WOULD ALSO SELL MORE THAN ANY OTHER SINGLE STONES ALBUM. BUT HOW GOOD IS IT? HUMPHREY KEENLYSIDE REFLECTS ON A PIVOTAL ALBUM.

Strange to relate, I remember being somewhat disappointed when I first heard *Some Girls*. That was partly because it took me quite a while to hear the record in its entirety. I was living in Germany, working as a swimming pool attendant (don't ask) which, among the many advantages, had flexible working hours, leaving either the mornings or the afternoons free. When *Some Girls* was released (on June 9, 1978) I made straight for the local record shop, where they had booths with record decks (remember those?) in which you could listen to records at your leisure.

For some reason, I felt guilty about listening to records, without knowing whether I was going to buy them or not. I must have been scared that I would be lambasted for getting something for nothing. I managed to assuage that guilt by just playing a couple of tracks at a time. Of course, the sales assistant probably didn't give a toss, but it's funny what guilt can do to you - especially in a foreign country...

So there I was, day after day, playing successive tracks of the album and plucking up courage, in my halting German, to say, no, actually I didn't want to buy the album. Why ever not, you may ask? Hard to remember. Looking back, I can probably think of a couple

of reasons. For one thing, every track seemed to be in the identical key which gave the album a kind of 'samey' feel. (The journalist and supposed Stones 'expert' Nick Kent later commented that all Mick's tracks were in the key of F. Actually, they are in A - close, Nick, but not quite right....) Secondly, I took an almost instant aversion to the faster 'punk' numbers (**Lies, Respectable**) and in particular to Mick's 'new' vocal style which seemed totally contrived.

But, with every play, the album grew. As so often happens with me, it was the slow tracks that appealed. The more I listened the songs, the more I realised I *had* to have the album. Finally, I could say to the shop assistant, yes, I wanted to buy this album. And for the rest of the summer, *Some Girls* dominated my listening. Even today, when I put it on, my mind is immediately cast back to the lazy days working by the open air swimming pool in Munich.

GET THIS ONE RIGHT, BOYS!

Twenty-five years after its release, it is now possible to see quite how critical *Some Girls* was in the Stones' career. After a trio of studio albums that had their moments but which came nowhere near to matching the glory years' quartet, one more lacklustre effort could have finished the Stones off. It was also important because it was Ronnie's first album with the Stones from start to finish, and all eyes were on him to see how well he performed - and integrated. Mick Taylor was certainly a hard act to follow. Just as importantly, Keith was back in the frame, supposedly having kicked heroin once and for all (you never know with Keith, but we will take it as read that he had started to focus on the music once again).

And, of course, the Stones had recorded in Paris for the first time, choosing a small room off the main studio in the Pathé Marconi Studios. Legend has it that Mick chose it because it was cheaper than the main studio but I prefer the explanation that the Stones found the smaller room generated a better sound. Indeed, the sound captured on *Some Girls* was fuller, yet more immediate than on any of their previous albums. Take a bow, Chris Kimsey.

Finally, the album was recorded in the teeth of the gale force that was punk, which threatened to consign the old rock bands to history (see *Jaap's feature*). That threat of itself was probably enough to

make Keith get off his arse and prove who was who and what was what (and here we are 25 years later, and guess who is still standing??).

The recording started in September 1977 and went through until March 1978. It was a particularly productive session in Paris, with according to James Karnbach and Carol Bernson (*The Complete Recording Guide to the Rolling Stones*), some 20 further songs over and above the final 10 put on *Some Girls* actually recorded or rehearsed. Some were clearly in near-final form (particularly the song, **Claudine**) as bootleg recordings attest. The idea was to get back to basics, just the five band members at the sessions without the “clever bastards”, as the erstwhile talented sidemen (Hopkins, Keys, Preston) were somewhat disparagingly called. Nevertheless, Ian Maclagan was invited along, as were saxophonist Mel Collins and harp player Sugar Blue, who was busking in Paris at the time!

TRACK BY TRACK

So what do we make of the 10 tracks that make up the *Some Girls* album?

Miss You: Cast your mind back those 25 years and try to remember the astonishment when the thumping ‘disco’ groove of Miss You leapt out of the, well.... record grooves, as you put the needle down. Was this really the Stones? We had got used to some unlikely album openers (Hot Stuff), and even others in a minor key (Dancing with Mr D), but this was something else. But by the time Mick gets to the line “*With some Puerto Rican girls that are just dyyyyying to meet you*” you begin to relax - this is the good ole Stones, sure enough. Your feet are starting to tap, and, man, that is some funky guitar going down. This was the first of many examples on the album of a three-guitar attack, now that Mick had turned his hand to plank-spanking (encouraged by Ronnie, less so by Keith). The guitars on their own gave the album a very different feel to any of its predecessors.

Time has done Miss You many favours - it really is an outstanding dance track which works best in its studio version - far less well as a concert singalong, much though Mick would like it to

be. There are two great instrumental breaks (by sax and harp respectively). More than that, Miss You was a showcase for Bill - even more so on the 12" version of the song, which was put out as the B side of Don't Stop (about time, too) - to finally have a place in the spotlight. It is probably stretching it to say his bass playing makes the song, but it is a mighty close thing.

Also worthy of special mention is Ronnie, whose adept lead guitar fills (some of which were inexplicably mixed out in the 40 Licks version) helped to lighten the thump of Charlie's at the time highly controversial 'four on the floor' drum pattern. As Mick pointed out in the *25x5* video, it was just a different beat, and he couldn't understand why people got so wound up about it. Well, Mick, you ought to know the conservatism of rock fans. In short, one song into the album, it was apparent that we were listening to a new band and a whole new sound.

When the Whip Comes Down: Not one of the strongest numbers in the Stones canon, but rescued by a good middle eight, some taut drumming by Charlie and a fadeout that seems to promise some better grooves to come. This was another three-guitar number, which the Stones developed further in their 1978 tour of America. Those who saw those shows say that this was arguably the band at their very best, no-nonsense rock and roll. What a pity we Europeans never got to see those shows. Ronnie, to this day, says that was his favourite tour with the band. Probably in today's PC society, this song would have never made the final cut.

Imagination: While the Temptations' version of this song was a dreamy, wistful affair, Mick and the boys Stonesified the number and turned it into a rock-soul ballad which had the critics reaching for their pens ("sacrilege", they cried), but, for me, this is a great song given a magnificent treatment. The band took a tremendous number and turned it into something better. A driving guitar sound, a perfect tempo, some wonderful fills by both Ron 'n' Keith, great backing vocals in the chorus and an inspired arrangement. Mick also invested the song's lyrics with genuine emotion ("*Soon we'll be married/And raise a family/Two boys for you/What about two girls for me?*")

which, as a family man he easily carried off. There's masses going on, but, despite that, Imagination has a great live feel to it, and you could pretty much imagine yourself watching the band play it - but that is probably just my imagination running away with me...

Some Girls: Another Mick song in the key of A and a real tour de force for the Mickster. This is a great vocal, with some superb bluesy harp playing. Naturally, everyone lighted on Mick's lyrics ("*Black girls just want to get fucked all night*"), which caused some good old album burning as Mick reacts, "if you can't take a joke, it's too fucking bad". More recently, Mick has switched the lyrics to avoid incurring too much wrath ("white" substituting for "black"). When the band played the song live for the first time in 1999, Mick, tongue firmly in cheek, said, "I hope I have offended everybody". Attaboy, Mick!

Keith's low rumbling bass lines give the song extra depth and groovesome flow. The band were really on a creative high, which meant that they never seemed to run out of ideas to embellish the songs; as Keith always used to say, you have to add a new element every 10 seconds or so to keep the listeners interested - and like *Exile*, the songs on *Some Girls* carry off his theory to perfection.

Lies: The one major argument that permeated proceedings was the rift between Mick and Keith over the tempo and feel of Mick's songs, which were heavily influenced by punk. "What the fuck do we need to try and sound like the Sex Pistols for?" Keith spat out. And on this one, I side 100 per cent with Keith. Without doubt *Lies* is the weakest song on the album, and given the many the band recorded for the album, surely a mistake for inclusion. Claudine would have made a much more interesting selection, especially given its shuffle-like tempo, although it is said the fear of legal action (the song was about Andy Williams' wife and some murky goings-on) made this a non-starter. *Lies* was included in the live set for the 1978 tour, but has since dropped completely off the radar.

Far Away Eyes: The album's country song, *Far Away Eyes* was rightly placed at the start of side two, to break the sequence of

driving rockers, but it merits such a key slot by virtue of its obvious star quality. Keith later complained that the released take was spoiled by Mick hamming it up, employing a faux country half-spoken, half-sung southern drawl after many “straight” takes. Otherwise, this is a damn-near perfect country song: a strong melody, a gorgeous chorus and a pedal steel solo by Ronnie that on its own was worth the band inviting him onboard. Probably for the first time, both Mick and Keith on piano.

Respectable: For me, one of the least successful numbers on the album, which starts promisingly, but tails off in a succession of repeated choruses. Mick could *definitely* have come up with another verse, especially in the vein of one of his best putdowns ever (“*You’re the easiest lay on the White House lawn*” - allegedly aimed at Bianca and President Gerald Ford’s son, Jack). Ronnie’s solo is also pretty nondescript. Chuck Berry meets punk and fizzles out.

Before They Make Me Run: Keith apparently worked engineer Dave Jordan to the bone recording this one, but it was worth it. It is a Keith classic, Keith’s nasal whine at his best, easily hitting the high notes, with a great, multilayered guitar middle eight, absolutely made by Ronnie’s pedal steel and some fine driving bass playing by the Riff-meister himself. And one of Keith’s best lyrics ever, “*Gonna find my way to heaven/Because I did my time in hell*” - what a great line!

Beast of Burden: the classics are coming thick and fast at this stage of the album, none more so than Beast of Burden. Keith claims much of the credit for writing this one, but it is probably a safe bet that Mick gave the song a lot of the shape and structure. Originally, it was planned that he would sing it falsetto; thankfully, he didn’t. The song showcases some more fine background singing from Mick and Keith - another characteristic of the album. Ronnie’s guitar trills and Keith’s soft acoustic washes balance out some of the thump of drums and bass. One of the few songs in the Stones catalogue where the studio version has never been improved on live. When the Stones finally call it a day, this would be the song I put on last, for its sense of yearning and regret.

Shattered: Just as *Miss You* had us all picking up our jaws from the floor, the album's closing track was another that seemed to come out of nowhere. It is fair to say that at that point, none of us Stones fans had ever heard anything like this. A percussion-led track, Mick spits out the words as if his very life depended on it, setting the seal on the on the 'New Yorkness' of the album, with his references to the "7th Avenue, Manhattan, money grabbers, rats on the West side" et al. More outstanding guitar work from Ron 'n' Keith - who, beyond all doubt, showed they were the dream guitar team. And does anyone really know who "1 Moroccan, 1 Jew and 1 Wasp" on percussion were? A great album closer and a track to round off several months of the band at peak creativity. And, of course, a special track for all of us here at the fan club...

DOWNWARD SLIDE

Some Girls was arguably the last of the great Stones albums. Certainly the next album, *Emotional Rescue*, was as weak as *Some Girls* was brilliant. The sound was similar, but something had been lost: the songs were nowhere near as strong and of the many recorded many were inexplicably left off (**Let's Go Steady, We Had it All, No Use in Crying**), Keith and Mick were starting to row again, and the focus had been lost. It wasn't until *Steel Wheels*, more than a decade later, that the band were 'in the same place' again. All subsequent albums have had their moments, but have tended to lack the cohesion and feel of the 10 songs that collectively made up the *Some Girls* album. So, go on, treat yourselves - slide it into your CD player and bite the big Apple. Me, I think I might just put on the LP instead.

FAST FORWARD TO NOVEMBER 2011...

So, here we are, a third of a century later, and finally some of those tracks have been given an official release, as part of the re-release of *Some Girls*. Again, let's take them track by track:

Claudine: originally slated to be on the *Some Girls* LP, this was left off because of the fear of being sued (Claudine refers to the wife of Andy Williams, who 'allegedly' shot her lover but was let off with a short prison sentence). So, the question is, how come now it is alright to release it, unless the lawyers have given the all-clear? More to the point, is it a good track? Answer, yes, because it is quite unlike any other track the Stones have recorded, a two-chord shuffle that rolls along with a tasty groove, bolstered by Keith and Ronnie's guitar interplay that has, let's be frank, never since reached the heights they achieved in those *Some Girls* sessions.

So Young: the one track that has already been released (as a B-side to Love is Strong), this is a tight rocker which could (?) have been written about Bill as much as Mick himself. Firmly tongue-in-cheek, this is the Stones at their rocking, funniest best, and slots perfectly onto the extra album.

Do You Think I Really Care: well known among bootleg collectors as 'Yellow Cab', this recalls Dead Flowers and swings with a similar country beat, propelled by Stu's honky tonk piano and Ronnie's accomplished slide and pedal steel playing.

When You're Gone: more chugging boogie, for which Ronnie gets a joint writing credit, which has a suspiciously 'modern' sounding Mick lead vocal and harp solo. Classify as filler along with Had it With You, Break the Spell, Too Tight etc. Given that So Young was included, it might have been better to have had Everything is Turning to Gold instead.

No Spare Parts: chosen as the bonus album's single, and rightly so. This may also have a new Mick vocal, but slots perfectly into the

Some Girls' country format (and was probably only left off because Far Away Eyes is even better). This has real charm, and again underpins the rightness of the decision to get Ronnie into the band, as he tosses some wonderful pedal steel fills. And take a bow, Don Was, for excellent production.

Don't Be a Stranger: the Stones '70s obligatory reggae-ish track, but with a nice acoustic feel. Don Was has added bass, and Matt Clifford gets a credit for percussion. This one lasts, and the chorus will stick in the mind.

We Had it All: this is pure gold, and worth buying the extra CD on its own. People often talk about Wichita Lineman (by Glen Campbell and Jimmy Webb) having the most affecting couplet of lost yearning love, but that is nothing on "*I know that we can't live those times again/So I let these dreams take me back to where we've been*", which Keith sings with cracked voice perfection. To my ears, that sounds like a different lead vocal take to the one we are used to hearing. Magic.

Tallahassee Lassie: apparently recorded during a stopover in the 1978 tour of America, this is the band having fun in the studio. A good-time rocker, and one of three covers on the bonus CD.

I Love You Too Much: a Keith song, initially rejected by Mick because he didn't like his vocal. So it is possible that Mick re-did the vocal (as well as, possibly, rewriting some of the lyrics). Not bad, but the right decision was made to leave it off the original album.

Keep Up Blues: sounding suspiciously like Stop Breakin' Down, this is another studio stretching out exercise, with Mick singing the words with tongue firmly in cheek in his inimitable way.

You Win Again: great to have this officially released. A boozy studio singalong, which really underlines how much fun the band were having (which spirit they probably never captured again). Yet more excellent Ronnie pedal steel playing.

Petrol Blues: this is the throwaway, Mick bashing away at the piano. Completely unnecessary and somewhat spoiling the effect. However, overall, the bonus tracks on *Some Girls* are far better than those added to *Exile on Main Street*.