

## STICKY FINGERS

**WHAT A STRANGE ALBUM STICKY FINGERS IS: RECORDED IN THREE DIFFERENT STUDIOS, THE FIRST TIME THAT THE ROLLING STONES MOBILE WAS USED, THE BAND IN A MAJOR STATE OF FLUX AFTER THE DISASTER OF ALTAMONT, HEADING SOON FOR EXILE ON THE FRENCH RIVIERA, ONE RECORDING CONTRACT TO BE SLOUGHED OFF AND A NEW RECORD DEAL TO BE NEGOTIATED. STICKY FINGERS REALLY DIDN'T OUGHTTA TO COME OUT AS WELL AS IT DID. BUT IT DID MORE THAN THAT, SAYS HUMPHREY KEENLYSIDE; IT TURNED OUT TO BE (FOR HIM) THEIR VERY BEST ALBUM.**

For most people it was the zip and those crotch-hugging, whiter than white underpants. But, for me, the real impact of Andy Warhol's Sticky Fingers cover was the inner printed card with *that* logo. It is the tongue that first hits you, leering eyes, lips and mammoth outstretched tongue on which had printed down each the five tracks of each side of the album.

The logo encapsulated everything about the Stones: sticking their tongue out at the establishment, full-on lasciviousness and with a touch of the cartoon character. They got it dead right first time; how many times since has that logo been reproduced? You hardly even need the name anymore; the logo says it all. (The original artwork for the logo, designed by John Pasche, was sold to the Victoria and Albert Museum for £50,000 in 2008.)

Recently, it came to light that the Andy Warhol-designed cover was an afterthought. The photo used in the inlay card (taken by Peter Webb) was the original cover before Andy Warhol propositioned Mick (as it were); Peter Webb's photos have now been officially acknowledged by the Rolling Stones office, according to a recent special issue of Q magazine on album covers.

But the really important part of the inlay card lies in the

paragraph in the top left hand corner. Jimmy Miller's simple request: "turn it up". He needn't have worried. From the opening riff of Brown Sugar to the closing orchestral chords of Moonlight Mile, Sticky Fingers, slow songs, blues laments, hard rock, Chuck Berry-inspired riffs and all, is just meant to be listened to at maximum volume. As with his work on Beggars Banquet, Let it Bleed and Exile on Main Street, Jimmy Miller's sheer brilliance at capturing the Stones sound so perfectly on record means that the louder you listen, the better it is.

Everyone has their own favourite Stones albums, and it is a fairly safe bet that most of us would choose one from those four. As John Perry so brilliantly explained in his exposition of Exile, why we like music and why we have favourites is completely subjective and often incapable of being explained. We like it because we ... well, we like it. But context is important, too. Where were you when you listened to the record? What was happening in your life at the time? How old were you? In my case, when Sticky Fingers was released I was at school - probably still cursing my not being able to catch the band on their short tour of England in March 1971. It was a hot summer, the term when I was due to take 'O' levels and so probably spending more time indoors than I would really prefer for having to prepare for the exams. All, but *all* of my friends, bought Sticky Fingers, so wherever you went you would hear it coming out of people's rooms. Sticky Fingers entered our heads and soaked our souls.

## **10 of the best**

Listening to the record 30 years later, I know exactly why Sticky Fingers is so good: it is the songs. Out of the usual Stones pandemonium came a classic of 10 no-nonsense, out-and-out, solid gold, fan-fucking-tastic songs. They might not have the feel of Exile or the power of Let it Bleed, but each song stands on its own, and among them you have got pretty much all the best: one of the Stones top three classics

(Brown Sugar), the best ballad in the Stones canon (Wild Horses), their best country song (Dead Flowers), their most soulful blues (I Got the Blues) and their best drugs song (Sister Morphine). Not to mention songs with great lyrics. You know you are dealing with the best when you get lyrics that range from "I'm no schoolboy but I know what I like" to "No sweeping exits or offstage lines" and everything in between. (I mean, what more could you honestly ask for?)

Sticky Fingers is a strange mix between the 'up' and the 'down'. You have the raw energy of Brown Sugar tempered by the melancholy of I Got the Blues, the all-out attack and distortion of Can't You Hear Me Knocking versus the exquisite delicacy of Wild Horses, the staccato attack of Bitch leavened by the majestic sweep of Sway. That is what keeps the listener totally engaged; at no point do you ever feel this is the Stones going through the motions.

### *Brown Sugar*

Everyone in the whole world knows the Brown Sugar riff, and every single guitarist in the world - professional and amateur - thinks they know to play the chords (myself included). But the truth of the matter is that no-one plays it like Keith. It is, of course, a great riff: when Keith slides the record on to the deck in the film of Gimme Shelter you can see he knows he has nailed it, as his loose limbs jive to the song's rhythm. The key to the song is that it is not taken too fast. The rawness of the electric sound is offset by a wash of acoustic guitar underneath, which curiously adds to the funkiness of the track as much as Ian Stewart's rollicking barroom piano. And then you all know the rest - and we won't even go into Mick's lyrics..... The Stones re-recorded the song a year after it was first recorded at Olympic Studios with Eric Clapton providing some tasty slide guitar and Al Kooper tinkling away on piano - and it still sounds just as good! At one time, this was the version they were contemplating putting out on the album. In fact, it makes no difference to us fans since, of course, we all have both

versions.

This may be heresy but, in my book, this is the only Stones classic that sounds better on the record than played live - even though they will have played the song in every concert since it was recorded, starting off at Altamont when Mick Taylor suggested they include it on the spur of the moment, bar the band's last two shows of the 1960s (played in London).

### *Sway*

One of a number of tracks recorded (in part) at Mick's house in Berkshire with the newly acquired Rolling Stones Mobile parked outside in the spring of 1970. Mick Taylor (who probably still to this day reckons he should have earned a songwriting credit) lets rip a classic fluid series of guitar lines that mean we don't even miss Keith's guitar playing on this track (and the absence of Keith may explain why the Stones have never played this one live). One of the buried treasures in the Stones catalogue.

### *Wild Horses*

Close your eyes, listen to those acoustic guitars and float away. As Keith does in the film of Gimme Shelter while listening to the playback, only to wake up as the final chord fades, nod and give his assent to the superb recorded version (out of tune piano and all). To show how good the song structure is, you can play it on standard tuning or in open G and both sound equally good. There is so much that is pure magic about this song that it is hard to single out any one moment, but here's one that gets me every time. Keith's short G major arpeggio (or "archipelago" (!) as he mistakenly calls it as he fluffs the introduction to Love in Vain on Stripped) underpinning Mick Taylor's second solo at 4:53 before the shift to A minor (hey!, I know that kind of shit, too!) and the lead-in to the final chorus.

Curiously, this was recorded and released by the Flying Burrito Brothers (of which, of course, Keith's buddy Gram Parsons was the leading light) before the Stones' version. As was Marianne Faithfull's version of Sister Morphine - even though it was quickly taken off the shelves after its release in 1969 - thus making it perhaps the only album where two of the songs hit the airwaves before the Stones' versions.

### *Can't You Hear me Knocking*

I defy anyone to come up with a more rollicking, dirty sounding opening riff than the one Keith slashes out to kick off Can't You Hear me Knocking. Against that rolling, thundering riff, Mick Taylor plays straight half-beat chord patterns and Mick almost screams his vocals. Cocaine eyes, and speed-freak jive, indeed! The song, after a blasting start, continues to pick up momentum in the choruses, thanks again to some impeccable Watts' sticksmanship. As the band stretches out, you can't help thinking that this would make a great opening number in the live set (Mick and Keith, are you listening?). Again, a first and a last: the only jam which made it on to an officially released studio album.

### *You Gotta Move*

A third song recorded at Muscle Shoals (not acknowledged on the sleeve credits) because union rules prevented the Stones in theory from recording in the States. The song is a raucous, unholy mess and all the more engaging for it. It sounds like it was recorded last thing before the studios were closed for the night. Stones sloppiness at its best, which contrasts completely with.....

*(pause to flip over the record)*

### *Bitch*

.....the tightness of Bitch. This song was apparently going nowhere until Keith, munching on a bowl of cornflakes (now there's an image to savour), put the bowl down, put on his Chuck Berry hat and took control. Not to forget Charlie, who drives the song forward with his (at that time) standard rolling snare drum pattern. It is one of Sticky Fingers' trademarks that a number of the tracks seem to "swell" as they proceed, either as more instruments get added, or - and I swear Jimmy Miller does this - they get progressively slightly louder. Bitch is a good example of this pattern, as the song shifts into another gear when Keith rips into a spitting, stuttering guitar solo, and the brass section blast away. Again, the tempo is exactly right: just listen to this version and compare with any of the live versions post-1989 and you can hear that in concert it loses some of its funkiness by (usually) being played too fast.

### *I Got the Blues*

In an album of top-ranking songs this is one of the very highlights, and probably one of the most tender songs in the Stones' catalogue (and "tender" is not often a word you often read in the same sentence as "the Stones"!). This was the Stones' tribute to Otis Redding, as Mick officially acknowledged at the 1999 Shepherds Bush gig, but that has more to do with the brass than the song itself. Personally, I think the brass actually detracts from the exquisite interplay between Keith and Mick Taylor. Keith may have found the early '70s' incarnation of the band too "intellectual" but he and Mick Taylor never played as well together as on this track - and rarely has the guitar sound been so spot-on. Mick's vocal positively aches with yearning, oozing late-night regret (at 3.00 in the morning indeed) and heartache. Greil Marcus calls *I Got the Blues* "monumentally contrived", which is about as monumental a misjudgement as is possible to have.

### *Sister Morphine*

Sister Morphine (for which Marianne Faithfull belatedly got a co-writing credit in the late 1990s) was recorded during the Beggars Banquet Sessions, which explains the presence of Ry Cooder, whose taut slide playing invests the song with its stark, eerie quality. You would have to scour hard and deep in the Stones' entire catalogue to find a song that sounds anything like Sister Morphine. Dark London streets, someone in the gutter, ambulances, doctors with no faces: man, someone is having a really bad hair day! Yet another song that builds from very little, picking up new sounds and instruments as it develops. Special honours to Bill (at 1:25) and Charlie (at 2:35) who show exactly why they were the perfect rhythm section for the band. But the masterstroke is the chord progression from F to E Major and back to the tonic of Am right at the song's conclusion, as the blood seeps over the sheets and the narrator's life ebbs away. Pretentious, I hear you say. Moi?

### *Dead Flowers*

And before we get too morose, in swings the country beat of Dead Flowers, in my opinion, Mick's best country song (with Evening Gown not far behind). And swing is the key here: the Stones can never do anything without hitting the right groove, aided, of course, by Stu on the joanna and some more driving drumming by Charlie. I can't be sure whether it is Keith or Mick Taylor who takes the solo (though my money would be on Keith), but whichever one of them it is, they get it dead right by not trying to be too flash and upsetting the balance. And what a payoff line! "I won't forget to put flowers on your grave." Only Elvis Costello with this Tramp the Dirt Down has managed quite so brilliantly to marry such top-quality melody with such vitriol in the lyrics. But lest we get too morose, Charlie's short glass-chinking tap on the symbol and Stu's final boogie-woogie tinkle as the song fades to make sure we know this is a country song after all.

### *Moonlight Mile*

And for the closer, we switch tack again with yet another song that sounds like nothing else the Stones have ever done before or since. Jim Price's piano gives the track an almost Eastern feel to it, and then the song takes over in another direction altogether with Paul Buckmaster's strings. At that time, Paul Buckmaster was adding strings to Elton John's songs and that may be where Mick got the idea. This is the song of the two Micks (Keith otherwise disposed) and it is said that Mick T always bemoaned not getting a joint writing credit. "Just another bad, bad day on the road," Mick J sings, sighing perhaps at the chaotic legacy of Altamont and the end of the 1960s. Phew! What a way to finish a classic album.

And there you have it: 46:27 of great music. If they had recorded the album in the CD era, they may have felt obliged to include two or three more tracks, which would have only served to reduce the album's stunning impact. No doubt, one day it will be re-released with 'bonus' tracks, probably the demos of *Tumbling Dice*, *Sweet Black Angel* and *Waiting on a Friend*. But I am sure most of us would rather have a full bonus live CD of the Stones' performance at Leeds. Some hope!

One measure of a great album is how often you can listen and re-listen to it without getting sick of it. *Sticky Fingers* passes that test with flying colours: if anything, you can hear more each time you play it. Not as radical as *Beggars Banquet*, not as dirty as *Some Girls* and not as true to the band's roots as *Exile*, *Sticky Fingers*, nevertheless, in my humble opinion, transcends them all. What about *Let it Bleed*, I hear you say? Well, that is faultless, too - but that is for someone else to review! - *Humphrey Keenlyside*