

## The Live Albums (bar two): Remastered, Reheard

What a package to receive in the post. All the live albums since *Ya-Ya's* except *No Security* (Why was that left out? No one seems to know), plus the DVD of *Live at the Max*. All remastered, spruced up courtesy of the band's new record label, Universal, and ready for yet another listen. So I sat down and - as if I needed an excuse - listened to each of them all the way through in the order in which they were originally released.

It was great to relive memories of live shows, and also the thrill of listening the greatest rock and roll band in high definition, high-quality glory. But, at the same time, listening to them back to back it is easier to pick out some flaws. What once seemed exceptional can on re-listening not be quite so brilliant. Never really been ones to experiment or jam, quite a few of the 'classics' can sound near-identical. Listen to *Paint it, Black* both on *Flashpoint* and *Live Licks* and you will see what I mean. Dare one say it, a couple of them should not - with the benefit of hindsight - have been released at all, or certainly not in the form they were. *Still Life* is a particular missed opportunity, nowhere near doing justice to what was a great live show. Talking of which, why no DVD of *Let's Spend the Night Together* which would have been a far better record?

It is pretty apparent that the band, especially Mick, do not have much interest in live albums. Just watch Mick mixing *Little Queenie* on the bonus section of the *Gimme Shelter* DVD and you can see how bored he is with the whole process, grimacing at what he perceives are his own mistakes. But it needn't be: many bands release live shows on a pick and choose basis, allowing fans to buy the shows and/or the songs they want. Maybe that will happen in due course with the Stones. Another factor that explains the diminishing interest in live CDs is the increased emphasis on DVDs. The Bigger Bang tour does not have a live CD release at all.

It is also revealing to listen to the transformation of the band down the decades, expanding in size for one thing, concentrating more and more on the show rather than on the performance. Yet, it is also astonishing to hear how they can still cut it, and adapt to changing audiences as well as mastering the art of performing both in huge stadia and in small clubs.

Here goes then, our review of the live albums. In time-honoured fashion, we award star rankings, which of course are just our opinion....

**Love You Live (\*\*\*)**. For me, two and a half good sides out of four. I know Jaap likes Side 4, but for me most of the songs are played too fast, and Mick's singing is too ragged. Quite a few standout tracks, though (*Honky Tonk Women*, *You Gotta Move*, a swinging *Around and Around*), and it is always fun to listen to the *El Mocambo* side (what a shame they didn't go half and half). The sound is also significantly improved. The groove on *It's only Rock n' Roll* really shines through.

**Still Life (\*\*\*)** is notable for its 'boomy' sound, reflecting the switch from arena to stadia, huge drapes, sound systems, walkways and all. Exciting no doubt, but does the music benefit? Not really, on the basis of this (what was then single) LP. Standout tracks Under My Thumb and Time is on My Side are swamped by rather stodgy versions of Start Me Up and Satisfaction. Shattered is an absolute mess. Conspicuous omissions which would undoubtedly have improved things are Black Limousine, Let it Bleed and Waiting on a Friend.

For the Steel Wheels/Urban Jungle you can take *Flashpoint* (the CD) and *Live at the Max*, 20th anniversary edition (DVD) essentially as one. Between them, they have 20 live tracks, plus two studio tracks. This was the tour when the Stones came back, after nearly folding during Mick and Keith's 'World War Three' rivalry. But come back with a bang they did and put on an incredible show. From first to last they were brilliant, the sound was excellent and the set list was varied and interesting (whoever would have thought that the band would roll out 2000 Light Years From Home?).

**Flashpoint (\*\*\*\*)**, therefore, for me stands up well as being a great souvenir of the tour. Throw in a great Clapton solo on Little Red Rooster (sadly edited and shortened from how he really played it), a rarity (Factory Girl) and a funky Miss You, and you have a great live album.

**Stripped (\*\*\*)**, a sort of live album, is an odd mix. Starting with Street Fighting Man, excellent though it is, is strange, since it was actually an encore at the Paradiso club gig. The two Brixton contributions (Like a Rolling Stone and Dead Flowers) are not correctly attributed as being from that source. Then, there are the acoustic replays of well known songs and some studio recordings.

Some versions do not add anything to the original and are redundant (Sweet Virginia, Slipping Away, Love in Vain). A full-on live acoustic album would have worked better, or even studio acoustic on one side (also including Honest I Do and Beast of Burden, for example) and live acoustic on the other. But, all that said, it does have a nice flow to it, and recaptures the intimacy of the 1995 club gigs. Cool cover photo, too.

**Live Licks (\*\*)**. Easily the most dispensable of the lot, whose stronger songs (Street Fighting Man, Monkey Man, Beast of Burden, Worried About You) are spoiled by the horrendous botched edit on Rocks Off (at the end of the middle eight), Sheryl Crow busting in on Honky Tonk Women and a slightly random order of songs on the second disc (OK - something that can be fixed by programming, I admit). Neither have they selected the best versions of the songs that they could have done.

**Get Yer Ya-Ya's Out (\*\*\*\*\*)**. I have saved the best for last. Casting swiftly over the overdubs that were made on most of the tracks, Ya-Ya's is absolutely magnificent. Each track merits its own review, pretty much, so

what makes the CD/LP (like many fans, I bought this as an LP when it first came out) quite so supreme?

Firstly, the sound. Ya-Ya's sounds more intimate than the others, and I don't just mean because most of the others were recorded outdoors. Glyn Johns really managed to capture the band working together. You can single out the individual performances but at heart this is a band working together. The sound upgrade is also fantastic, bringing up the bass and increasing the sharpness. You feel as if you are right up on stage with the band.

Plus, now we have the full concert, with the release of five extra songs on the bonus EP all of which are mirrored in footage on the bonus DVD. All are worth having. On the two acoustic numbers (Prodigal Son, You Gotta Move), it is great to see Mick and Keith just the two of them, and it is rare indeed that you see Keith playing with a slide on his National guitar (he doesn't play much slide, he says, "because there has always been someone else in the band who plays slide better than me"). Under My Thumb (on to which I'm Free is segued) is far superior to the versions on *Still Life* and on *The Biggest Bang*. Satisfaction is also great, the style of which will be familiar to anyone who has the 'Get Yer Leeds Lungs Out' bootleg.

Above all, the band are completely on form and on song. They rock, they swing, they groove, dammit, they play with real feeling (have they ever played the blues better than on Love in Vain?), and they were completely cool. Newboy Mick Taylor belies his nerves with sweeping, majestic, expressive solos. And Keith totally supreme in all aspects of his playing - no longer a Chuck Berry wannabe, but an all-round guitarist who, like Mick, is concentrating on getting the songs right. Peerless and, sadly, showing up just how much his playing has declined over the years. Unlike all the other live CDs, *Ya-Ya's* is one which you can play over and over again without it ever tiring - and that is really something after 40 years!

And then, to add to that, there is a bonus disc of the support acts performances (BB King (thanking the Stones for inviting him to open) and Ike & Tina Turner, who are absolutely scintillating). The DVD bonus provides a few other interesting moments - Keith playing piano, Janis Joplin dancing in the wings, the Stones and the Grateful Dead waiting to catch a helicopter to Altamont, Mick, in the style of a Victoria aristocrat, looking at his watch and chain (really!).

So if I had to choose the best of the best from all of these live albums and assemble the definitive live album from out of all of them, what would it comprise? Let's for the sake of argument limit it 20 songs. In no particular running order:

Honky Tonk Women (Love You Live)  
Jumpin' Jack Flash (Ya-Ya's)  
Love in Vain (Ya-Ya's)  
Street Fighting Man (Live Licks)

Sympathy for the Devil (At the Max)  
If You Can't Rock Me/Get off of My Cloud (Live You Live)  
Time is on My Side (Still Life)  
Monkey Man (Live Licks)  
Little Queenie (Ya-Ya's)  
Under My Thumb/I'm Free (Ya-Ya's bonus EP)  
Around and Around (Love You Live)  
Factory Girl (Flashpoint)  
You Gotta Move (Love You Live)  
Beast of Burden (Live Licks)  
Stray Cat Blues (Ya-Ya's)  
Let it Bleed (Stripped)  
Ruby Tuesday (Flashpoint)  
Midnight Rambler (Ya-Ya's)

- Humphrey Keenlyside