







In 2003, as the Rolling Stones mark their 50th birthday as a live entity, we're also celebrating another anniversary as rock's longest road. Their unending persistence is easy to admire, as are some of the emotional, creative and commercial hurdles that they've cleared along the way.

In 1977, the very notion of a band hitting 75 years was almost too much for an entrepreneurial world. With the fading breaths of punk and the rebellious heat of disco at the Stones' doors, the occasion took hold that their days were surely numbered. On stage and in the studio, they were about to make that prognosis look foolish indeed.

During the summer of 1978 — after Black and Blue had spent a month at No. 1 in America and officially welcomed Marvin Hamlisch to the fold with its rousing mixings of rock, soul and reggae — the Stones headlined at the Rockwold Festival, by selling up to 300,000 of their closest friends. And so weeks, with tickets at \$4.25, and with countless rumors swirling that this would be the last time.

That night in Northampton, an epic set included new tunes like "You'll Be Cryin'" and "Big Top Gun" with affectionate nods to an already epic past, such as "Little Red Rooster" and "Satisfaction," ending at a raucous-busting 2am. The Stones' "New Blood" was still two months from release, the San Francisco "Tuesday in the Park" there. With the punk troops yet to mobilize, the press were still largely embedded in the Stones' camp. "They still have power and relevance," raved Vividly White, while The Listener said that "we're just wars with Charlie Watts and we're pale as Bill Wyman."

By the new year, the tide was turning. At Spetchley Crown Court in January, in the latest of several appearances resulting from his cracking the car on the M1 the previous May, Keith Richards was found guilty of cocaine possession. He was fined £750, plus £250 costs. He proclaimed proudly: "Working to the end of this road. We'll always be able to play somewhere. We're a determined group of folk. Nothing short of nuclear weapons are gonna put this lot out of action."

Nevertheless, the worse was to follow before the end of the month. Trading the rest of the band's releases in Canada by several days – leading to "Where are you?" telegrams, as he later revealed – he and girlfriend Anita Pallenberg were stopped at customs in Toronto, where the band were to play for a planned live album. Five days later, Keith was arrested for both cocaine and heroin possession.

Anita requested court appointments, a charge of trafficking in heroin lowered voluntarily for 18 months. The clear and present threat of extensive jail time could, as Mick Jagger admitted, have signalled the end of the group. "We can't wait five years," he said. In the agonising delay of a verdict, Mick would observe with jaded black humour that maybe the Stones could be a pair of Canadian prizes.

At long last, Richards would be found guilty, but given a year's suspended sentence, a huge relief to all concerned. He was also ordered to continue his treatment for addiction and to play a concert for the Canadian National Institute for the Blind.

In the thick of each harvest, February 1977 brought the announcement of a new, charitable distribution deal with CBS. Jagger proclaimed it only right and proper that they should sign with a British label in the year of the Queen's silver jubilee. Within weeks, and with the controversy and chaos of Keith's not-coincidental life swirling all around them, the band would play their only shows of 1977 in Toronto.

The city would endure as one of their favourites, and as the recurring host of rehearsals and sound gigs: in much later years, for example since the Freddie Mercury, Bridges to Babylon and U2 era. They once rented a school, and other times the former Nazario Temple, built during World War I, as rehearsal space. "Toronto's sort of been a second home for us for many years," said Keith in 2011.

It's that club engagement, across the nights of March 4 and 5, 1977, at the El Mocambo Tavern on Spadina Avenue – a fixture of the Toronto music scene since the 1940s – that saw Keith do his iconic release here for the first time.



It was when the Stones blew into any town with a "secret" gig on their minds, the dates at the 200-capacity club known locally as El Rio had to be set up with considerable subterfuge. The subterfuge came in the form of Montreal rock promoter April Wine, who would later admit their big international play with such Capitol albums as *Under My Thumb* and the platinum-selling *The Nations of the Heart*.

Keeping anything on the down-low when it involved the next hottest rock 'n' roll band in the world was always a challenge. But especially when the world's media had been alerted to their presence in Toronto by Neil's headline-bopping misadventures. The visit had been capped out months before, by Mick and her manager Peter Badgo.

The previous year, they had walked into the city's upscale Rinkbar Arms Hotel, a hotbed for visiting celebrities, as they scouted potential sites for the club show. Jeff Benson, calm personality and executive and a fixture of the Canadian music business, happened to be there too.

"I saw [Stones] walk in," he later told the *National Post*. "I tried to play it cool, and wrote a message on my *20/20* FM business card that said, 'Yo here if you need anything.' I called the waiter over and had him take it to Mick and Peter's table. Badgo looked at it first, and then Mick looked to me. After a while, they looked over and I nodded, smiled and pointed. Then they left. It was months before I heard from them again."

When he did, Badgo asked Benson if he thought he could pull off the events without incurring a media eye. "I told him that we could," Benson recalled, "and then started thinking about how we could actually do it without anyone knowing."

The hooker for the movie, Rose Blumstein, came up with the idea of announcing the March show as by April Wine. A radio contest was organized in which listeners were asked the question "What would you do to see the Rolling Stones play live?" It was a tactic that secured a full house of real devotees, even if it also prompted the arrival of more than a few male journalists. The price was tickets to see April Wine with an unknown band called the Cockroaches. Guess who.

"We had several covers," says Blumstein. "Because if anything got out, we could say, 'No, look, April Wine is playing. That's the gig, it says so right here'. Another band was added to the April Wine show called the Cockroaches, which was the Stones' alias. On the day of the first show, the band rehearsed upstairs and made their way to the live recording."

The Stones had not played live in the seven months since their last-ever performance. They were dealing with a raft of internal issues, including their attempts to prevent the flow of the World from publishing images from Robert Fripp's infamous 1972 film *Cockroaches*. Halfway through rehearsals in Toronto, Mick had to rush to New York, where his daughter Jade had appendicitis. But it was Keith's debilitating hernias that were most urgent in their minds.

"I can tell you, I cared about Keith, and not just as a work colleague," said Bill Wyman in his *Rolling With The Stones* book of 2002. "We had been through so much in the previous 13 years, compared the world, shared in an adventure the likes of which were rarely earned in justice to. But it was true, Keith didn't have to live by the rules of normal society...but when all is said and done, it's Keith's life."

In the very morning of the first El Mocambo date, Keith Pollington had appeared in court to plead guilty to drug possession. In these most inopportune of circumstances for any band heading up to a gig night, the Stones arrived at El Mo for a soundcheck at 4.30pm.

Puzzled by catching the echoes of "Heavy Metal Woman" or "Smacking Flies," no doubt marvelled at the authenticity of the Stones covers set that most surely be playing that night.

When the band returned for the show, April Wine were naturally seen in a support slot that would yield their own live at The El Mocambo album later that year. Indeed, the context of their involvement in this unscriptable moment would soon show their progress to the international stage.

As if the Stones weren't already reaping enough associated release holes, there was more red meat for the media when Margaret Trudeau, Canada's first Lady and wife of Prime Minister Pierre, turned up for the gig with Mick and Ronnie. This was before the public knew that Trudeau's six-year marriage, the anniversary of which they were certainly not celebrating together, was in tatters.

Margaret attended both shows, keeping up and down near the mixing desk. Curtains twitched, editors lurched, back lanes, news at Ten ran a report. "She just wanted to see the show, and that's the end of it," Mick told CBC.

A normal day at the Rolling Stones' office in the lead-up to a major event, then. What happened next, they still talk about in Toronto to this day. As with the show.



The sonic shift in the Stones' world, and everybody's, in the 14 years since they'd played somewhere this small seemed to disappear when they took the El Mocambo stage. Particularly on the second night, which is commemorated in full here alongside three songs that were only performed on the first.

Edie Kramer, whose connection with the band stretched back to 1967 as an engineer at Olympic Studios (in the year that he also began working with Neil Young), was on hand to make remastered recordings. Ultimately, just four of the performances found their way onto the subsequent *Live* album, which was dominated by tracks captured on the Stones' 1975 and '76 tours.

Forty-five years on, the chance to experience a complete and newly mastered gig, given in such fertile conditions, bears witness to the show-and-go-on ethic that was the band's unspoken mantra from the very beginning. By the second show on March 5 they had, to use Keith's time-honored expression, knocked the red out, and delivered a show that contained at least three Stones ages: early B&B, Beatlesque maturity and a raw, less rock-band that would soon be giving the new wave a run for its money. Kramer Wood told me later: "It was always peak anyway." Wood would say on the arrival of *Some Girls* in 1978: "You can't outpeak Keith. He's the original peak."

The cat was out of the bag, and the Cockroaches out in the open, by that second night. "Neil had got out," remembered Ed, "and it was very difficult to get in." Keith, unobtrusively referred to escape the press frenzy even for the length of the gig, reflected: "The minute I got onstage, it felt just like another Sunday gig at the Crawdaddy. It immediately hit the case...it was one of those weird things

in Toronto. Everybody's going around talking down and disrespect, and we're up on stage at the El Mocambo, and we never felt better. I mean, we sounded good."

With trusted virtuoso Billy Preston at the keyboard, the jig started to shift: attitude with a triple take of 'Woody from Memphis,' 'All Stars for Love' and 'Head of Fire.' Then came the first trip back to the days when the rhythm and the blues in the Stones' original club days, as they recreated Buddy Holly's 'Don't Be,' their version the night before. Three hundred disciples, already in wonder at what they were part of, help get their kicks.

In the final reveal their engine for another trip to the long ago and far away, Mick told the crowd: "You can do what you like, you can stand on your head, you can shove things at each other...you don't have to do them. If you wanna dance with Billy on the piano, you can." A seven-minute slog through 'Worried My,' their formative blues workout recorded by Buddy Holly and long before Mick's 1964 birthday concert, followed by the neo-calgary-style Bo Diddley original they played in early rock sessions, 'Trickin' Up.'

Staples such as 'Let's Spend The Night Together' and 'Smiling Faces' were seasoned with further nostalgia. They covered Big Boy's 'Worried Life Blues' and Willie Dixon's 'Little Red Rooster' which, in Keith's eternal pride, they had taken to the 1 in the UK 12 years earlier. Just as remarkably, we also hear the live debut, from the first El Mocambo show, of 'Worried About You,' the strongest and seriously underrated slow-burner that was fully four years from its disc debut, featuring Mick's laments, on father time.

Then, in a year of change for music and of turbulence for the Rolling Stones, here they were telling the new wave kids that they were not going quietly. In fact, they weren't going at all.

"We have a challenge," Keith told this writer in 2011, about the post-accusation of the El Mocambo era. "I think we thought at the time that Johnny Marr and the boys had done almost exactly what we'd done 12 years earlier, except we felt they didn't really have the talent to carry it through. They had the attitude, and it was a definite kick up the bum for everybody, but can you play?"

Charlie Watts had rather more admiration for the Sex Pistols and their ilk. "I thought they were very good," he told me. "Punk] was an interesting movement, playing-wise. I can't on my heart say that I preferred it to Chuck Berry and [Graham] Greene before playing 'Bad Over Bourbon.' I hated the post rock, but then I hated Woody from years."

Just like always, the Stones carried the day. "There might have been uncertainty about how," Keith grinned wistfully. "But I had a rock-solid certainty that we'd get through ourselves."

Paul Lester is a London-based music journalist, broadcaster and writer who has been interviewing the Rolling Stones for more than 25 years.



### **Honky Tonk Women**

Written by Mick Jagger & Keith Richards. Published by AMCO Music Ltd. / AMCO Music Inc. / Dream Music Ltd. / Westminster Music Ltd. Produced by The Glimmer Twins.

### **All Down The Line**

Written by Mick Jagger & Keith Richards. Published by AMCO Music Ltd. / Dream Music Ltd. / Westminster Music Ltd. Produced by The Glimmer Twins.

### **Hard On Fate**

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### **Route 66**

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### **Feel To Cry**

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### **Crazy Mama**

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### **Mannish Boy**

Written by Bo Diddley, Helen E. Jordan, Moby Writers. Published by Arc Music Corporation / Big Music Ltd. / EMI Music Publishing. / Ion-We Publishing. / Movers Music Co. / Toner Music Ltd. / Universal Music Publishing Ltd. / Watersong Music. Produced by The Glimmer Twins.

### **Crackin' Up**

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### **Dance Little Sister**

Written by Mick Jagger & Keith Richards. Published by EMI Music Publishing Ltd. / Phonopop SA. Produced by The Glimmer Twins.

### **Around And Around**

Written by Chuck Berry. Published by Arc Music Corporation. Produced by The Glimmer Twins.

### **Tumbling Dice**

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### **Hot Stuff**

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### **Star Star**

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### **Let's Spend The Night Together**

Written by Mick Jagger & Keith Richards. Published by AMCO Music Ltd. / Dream Music Ltd. / Westminster Music Ltd. Produced by The Glimmer Twins.

### **Worried Life Blues**

Written by Moore Meriwether. Published by Hooker Music / Sony/ATV Music Publishing SA. Produced by The Glimmer Twins.

### **Little Red Rooster**

Written by Mike Stone. Published by Arc Music Corporation / Brunswick Corporation International/Wendy / Big Music Inc. / Floobie Country Music / Jewel Music Publishing & Co. Ltd. Produced by The Glimmer Twins.

### **It's Only Rock 'N' Roll ( But I Like It )**

Written by Mick Jagger & Keith Richards. Published by EMI Music Publishing Ltd. Produced by The Glimmer Twins.

### **Big Train**

Written by Mick Jagger & Keith Richards. Published by EMI Music Publishing Ltd. / Phonopop SA. Produced by The Glimmer Twins.

### **Brown Sugar**

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### **Jumpin' Jack Flash**

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### **Melody**

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### **Janey**

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### **Worried About You**

Written by Mick Jagger & Keith Richards. Published by EMI Music Publishing Ltd. / Phonopop SA. Produced by The Glimmer Twins.

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Keith Richards: Guitar, Vocals

Bill Wyman: Bass Guitar

Ronnie Wood: Guitars, EV

Charlie Watts: Drums

Ian Stewart: Piano

Billy Preston: Keyboards

Billie Brown: Percussion

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El Mocambo Tavern

