

Ladies and Gentlemen, the Rolling Stones!

[Note: This begins with an intro written for 'Becoming Almost Famous,' the compilation in which the Stones piece appears.]

I was busy with *Parade* magazine, which, in 1981, had me profile Linda Ronstadt, baseball manager Billy Martin, Donna Summer and James Taylor. I also did a piece on three up-and-coming women musicians who, unfortunately, up and went nowhere.

In June, I got a call from Paul Wasserman, publicist for the Rolling Stones. Now, the Stones were known as one of the few bands that engaged a publicist for the purpose of keeping the press *away*. This attitude--or pose--is pretty common these days, but back in the Seventies and Eighties, it was almost unheard of. But the band didn't need publicity, and, in the aftermath of drug busts, deaths, personnel changes and a wedding or two, its core members preferred not to bother with being bothered.

So I'm not sure why "Wasso" was calling, except that I'd covered the Stones a couple of times while at *Rolling Stone*. Although I thought, and soon confirmed, that *Parade* was not the right home for a piece on this group of latter-day punks, I wound up doing the article for a magazine that was right in my home town.

Hal Silverman, the editor of *California Living*, part of the big *San Francisco Chronicle/Examiner* package, had been after me to write for him. As a freelance, I was still doing mostly national stories. With the Stones tour set to hit the Bay Area (as their tours invariably did), Silverman said he wanted the story. I joined the band for their first concert, at JFK Stadium in Philadelphia, in late September, where they played in front of 90,000 fans. Three weeks later, they were in San Francisco, where more than 140,000 people were jammed into the old Candlestick Park. (The Beatles had drawn 25,000 for what turned out to be their last live concert in August of 1966.) They were only ten or eleven dates into a fifty-concert tour, but Jagger had already--can you imagine this?—stopped talking to the press. Fortunately, we'd had a sitdown in Philadelphia.

Years ago, smug in his richness and his youth, Mick Jagger swore he wouldn't be "leaping about, singing 'Satisfaction' at age forty-two."

Now, here he is, on the road again, leaping about and singing Satisfaction to bigger crowds than ever, for more money than ever. What a difference a payday can make. And so the Rolling Stones, their lead singer now thirty eight, just keep rolling on.

They started eighteen years ago, in 1963, playing rhythm and blues clubs around London. They broke through the next year, and right away they were the dark, flip side of the Beatles. The Fab Four were cute, precocious and seemingly innocent. The Stones were ugly, malicious and clearly dangerous.

And they have survived. They've weathered the sixties, which ended for them with the free and ultimately deadly concert in Altamont.

They got through the seventies, which started with their unofficial crowning as "the greatest rock and roll band in the world" and the death of original lead guitarist Brian Jones, and ended with lots of questions. Their music seemed to wallow in mid-decade and yet, every three years, they'd go on tour and rev up a storm of interest. Mick got married (in 1971) and seemed to revel in the jet set he used to despise, but, on stage, he somehow maintained that nasty-little-boy image.

The Stones survived a serious drug conviction against guitarist Keith Richard and the loss of Brian Jones's replacement, Mick Taylor, and they persevered in the face of New Wave music, and attacks by punk rockers that they, the original punks, had become rock and roll dinosaurs. Still, just over a year ago, bass player Bill Wyman began talking about retirement.

So the question was: How long could they go on?

At this moment, the logical answer is: forever. Their recent tour sold out faster than any rock tour before it, even though half the dates were in large football and baseball stadiums with capacities of between 65,000 and 90,000. Additional shows had to be added in several cities. With admissions averaging about \$15, the Stones figured to pull in a gross of some \$30 million, \$10 million more than the business they did three years ago.

And, while the Stones have retained many of their original fans, ' they have also drawn teenagers, kids who weren't even born when the band started up, young fans who were turned on to the Stones by their own parents.

But the fans -- their numbers and their age range -- tell only part of the story. Newspapers, magazines, radio and TV took to the Stones as never before. Wherever they went, the papers responded with front page stories and ran whole series on them - their history, their future, the gossip about where they were staying, eating and partying.

"The feeling among the media," said Paul Wasserman, the Stones' press agent, "was `We gotta do something; we can't just ignore it.' There's a gut instinctive feeling that they're the big news."

Why? "Because they're the last survivors of the Golden Era," he said. "They're the last of the big three: Dylan, the Beatles and the Stones, the three mythical characters of the sixties."

But the Stones were more than myth. The reality is that they helped shape and define and explain many of the social changes of the sixties.. They also reflected the decadence, the self-love, the political frustrations and ennui, and the chi-chi rituals that prevailed in the seventies. And in the eighties, they've become legitimate news to the people who now decide what goes into the newspapers and onto the airwaves, people in their thirties, men and women who were raised on rock - and the Stones.

This, of course, is personal theorizing. For the Word, one must go to the source, the head Stone.

Jagger is not only the lead singer of the Rolling Stones; he's their manager as well. It's Mick who set up the tour, decided where to play and how much to charge. The bad boy of old has become, of all things, respectable. In Philadelphia, he accepted a Liberty Bell on behalf of the band. In Boston, the mayor invited them to play a free concert downtown (the Stones declined). And in San Francisco, a properly suited Jagger rode a cable car with Mayor Dianne Feinstein and plugged her fund drive to save the city's moving landmarks.

Wherever he went, Jagger was a diplomat. For each performance, he wore an outfit to identify with the area he was visiting. In Philadelphia, he wore a Flyers jersey; in San Francisco, he paid tribute to the just-vanquished A's by wearing an, Oakland

uniform, with "Jagger" stitched on the back. It was Jagger the rock star/pro jock; the aging Brit as all-American kid; fantasies in full display.

When the Stones were in San Francisco for the Candlestick Park shows and a week of R&R, Jagger did not talk to the press. In fact, he had an altercation with a radio reporter who walked up to him in a restaurant with tape recorder rolling. But in Philadelphia, after the first concert of the tour, he sat for an interview in his suite at the Barclay Hotel. Scattered about his room were a few items -- a running outfit, a racquetball racquet, and a memo from an aide reminding Jagger of things to do, including "Exercise -- outdoors if possible." Jagger was obviously following orders. He looked ridiculously healthy and as skinny as ever.

What are you, part Chinese? How do you keep looking so young?

Well, I think it's what you're born with. I was raised to be healthy. I bucked against it a lot in my teens and in my early twenties - but then you come back to it.

The last time around, in 1978, the press seemed interested in three subjects., Keith Richards' bust and your reaction to punk rock . . .

You can see how different this tour is; they're not interested in any of that.

This time, the hook seems to be "Are the Stones too old to rock? Is this the last time around?"

That's an old perennial. I think it's were so heavy on it last time, and then we do another one, so obviously they can't make such fools of themselves, just to keep hopping on it. It's a dead dog.

The tour is going to gross about \$30 million. Has this passed ...

... Yeah, everyone's wildest dreams! We didn't expect to do this kind of business.

Part of that is because you're doing so many outdoor shows this- time, which helps meet the demand for tickets and makes you more money, but you've said before that you didn't like doing the stadium shows. . .

I have no misconceptions that I can play to a stadium in the same way we can play to an arena. I think we're running on 15 percent efficiency in the stadium. I don't think we're pleasing the people enough.

Of course, for a lot of people, it's not so much the concert as the experience of being there, in the same place as the Stones...

... With their friends, in their town or the surrounding areas, but yes, to be in the same place, and I think the music's incidental a lot. It could be us or several others.. .

Maybe...

... It helps to be us. But c'mon, we're only an excuse; you might as well use us as anybody for them to have a good time. 'Cause they can't see from the back. I do the same thing. Those afternoons are quite like going to see a football game.

From today's show it is clear you are having as much fun on stage as ever.

Yeah. You can fool around and no one minds. And on an outdoor show in the afternoon with the sun shining, no one wants to hear about your problems. In other words, they don't want to hear you do a serious song too much.

In today's show, you played quite a few oldies...

Outdoor shows are different. You've got a pretty large cross-section of people that like the Rolling Stones because they've been around for a long time, and you don't want to pander to them; you want to be able to play new stuff at least half of the show. But yes, it's basically hits, up tempos and a few ballads, whereas indoors you can stretch yourself a bit more and play nearly all new stuff.

A lot of younger Stones fans say they first heard you through their parents. Which is quite a distance from the sixties, when a lot of the appeal of the Stones was from how you outraged parents.

I can't see how they can be outraged about the Rolling Stones. No parent in the mid-thirties age group is outraged. Maybe we should outrage them.

But, as you yourself have said, there's nothing new any more in rock and roll, it's all "recycled past."

The thing about rock and roll ... the influence of rock and roll is all pervasive in all other forms of music, as the other forms of music are on rock and roll. You've got these intertwinings, but the real rock and roll and excitement - if you have a new artist with a "new sound," it tends to be what the old sound was. What people like is purity. Rock and roll is a traditional form now.

But if the music's just going around in circles, where does your own continuing interest in it come from? Is it just what you do, or is there still something that the music does?

Well, I think that I still live in hope that rock and roll will turn a corner and doesn't just keep reverting. I think it will eventually. Hope I'll be around when it does.

You sound like a serious musician, which kind of contradicts the image that you have in the gossip columns...

But I certainly don't invite it. I don't do talk shows. I don't do *People* magazine. I don't try and get on the gossip circuit.

But you're still on it ...

Well, you know, that's how it goes. It started in England when I was very young, when I was twenty. It took me one year to get to that elevated level without actually wanting it. And it took me 20 years to do it in America! But ... I guess after a tour it tends to disappear.

Even as we were talking, though, there were knots of people ten floors below, waiting for him or another Stone -- but preferably him -- to show his face.

When he finally left the hotel for a late dinner, he was rushed by fans, some of whom got past security guards and grabbed at his hair, at his scarf, at any possible souvenir. When he returned, at three in the morning, they were still there. Mick said the fans don't bother him. "I don't think they want a piece of me," he said.

And the fans, at the stadiums and at the hotels, served to remind him that, in his nineteenth year with the company, business is still very good.

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