



Rock of ages

Mick Jagger tells Simon Hattenstone about the names he got called when he was at school, how he is struggling to put on weight and - of course - being great in bed. Just don't ask him to explain his songs

Simon Hattenstone
Friday September 9, 2005

Guardian

Like so many boys who don't want to grow up, Mick Jagger still has his gang around him. The Rolling Stones, 43 years on, have just embarked on another mammoth 18-month world tour, and released their first studio album in eight years.

The Stones might have done little in that time, but it has not been without incident for Jagger. Mr Rock'n'Roll has become Sir Rock'n'Roll, made another solo album, become a film producer, been divorced by Jerry Hall (the mother of four of his seven children), contested a paternity suit from Brazilian model Luciana Morad before embracing his son Lucas, and enjoyed the company of numerous models young enough to be his grandchildren and tall enough to turn him into a wizened old man.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Stones made some of the greatest albums ever: *Beggars Banquet*, *Sticky Fingers*, *Let it Bleed*, *Exile on Main Street*. Their blend of hard rock, country, blues, and balladry, of priapic posturing and shocking tenderness, remains unique. But it has been the best part of a quarter of a century since the last decent Stones album. Sure, the band could still tour and clock up record box offices every time, but they were dinosaurs, the *Strolling Bones*, a circus act, trading off their back catalogue and collective nostalgia. They had no new songs worthy of their name.

Until now. The new album, *A Bigger Bang* is a pretty good record, and a couple of the songs could become mini-classics. Surprisingly, Jagger, who has spent a lifetime shying away from the personal, has made an album verging on the confessional.

He looks amazing these days. His face is more rock than human - lined with great vertical cracks like so much erosion. At the same time, it is remarkably unchanged - those exaggerated features, the leering sensuality, that pornographic beauty. We meet in a Toronto school where the Stones are busy rehearsing for their tour.

He pours me a glass of wine and talks about the cricket, one of his great loves. As he does so I can't help staring at his body. He is so skinny. His waist is tiny. There is something miraculous about it - a testament to his drive, his obsessive workouts, his ego. We could be back in 1964, him singing *The Last Time* on *Ready Steady Go*, jiggling hips and lips, louche and provocative in a way no Englishman had been before.

But there is also something Dorian Gray about the waist. Jagger is still vain enough to wear the tight, too-short T-shirt that shows off a tummy a teenage anorexic would be proud of. Over it he wears an open shirt. On the side of a sofa is a hat, a white straw boater. Another persona. When not playing the legendary sex thimble or ageing roué, he enjoys approximating the English aristocrat. Bill Wyman, the former Stones bass player, once called him "a nice bunch of blokes". Over the years, Keith Richards has called him plenty worse: selfish, greedy, mean, shallow and, just recently (and apparently much to Jagger's annoyance), modestly endowed. They are a temperamental odd couple, loving, catfighting, forever on the brink of divorce, but destined to see it through to the bitter end.

I ask Jagger if he thought he and Richards would be able to write together again after all the bad blood. "Yeah, absolutely," he says. "It's all about having the songs." In the main, Jagger and Richards wrote the new songs separately and came together to refine them. Because Charlie Watts (the only other original band member) was recovering from cancer, it meant that for the first couple of weeks of recording, the Stones were reduced to Jagger and Richards. "Keith played the bass, I played the keyboards and bass and drums. So we had a lot of fun just being two people in a band. I think that added to the feeling of togetherness of it all. And we knew the songs pretty much inside out before Charlie got there." The Stones are a four-piece these days, but Jagger doesn't even mention Ronnie Wood, whom he seems to regard as a hired hand.

"The actual creative process was enjoyable, and creative processes aren't always enjoyable." Blimey, you can say that again, I say, encouraging him to tell his myriad wild stories. Silence. After all, plenty of your creative processes have sounded hellish, I continue. Silence. Like in the 1980s, I cajole. What I want to say is: "Like in the 1980s when, so the rumour goes, Keith wanted to kill you and Charlie almost did" - but I can't. There is something controlling about Jagger, something quietly intimidating. He is polite and friendly, he laughs and joshes, but I am also aware of how aware he is that this is business. "Ah, the 1980s," he says, as if struggling to remember. "Yeah, it wasn't very good, the 80s, in some ways . . . the end of the 80s was hugely successful, though."

So how's he getting on with Richards these days? "We seem to be getting on pretty good. For the past year anyway. Keith and I get on a lot of the time very, very well. Of course, we don't agree all the time. I don't agree with Charlie all the time." Indeed, he doesn't. There was the time when, according to Watts, Jagger called him in the middle of the night, said "Where's my drummer then?" and told him he was ready to record. Watts got out of bed, dressed himself - immaculate as ever, suit, tie, ironed shirt - walked downstairs to meet Jagger, pulled back his arm, swung his fist, and laid him out. "Don't you ever call me your drummer," he said. "You are my singer." I'm

waiting for these great stories, but they don't come. Jagger is a rock'n'roll diplomat, an anecdote-free zone.

Why has it been seven years since the last studio album? His answer provides a fascinating insight into Rolling Stones Ltd. Whereas other bands tour to promote an album, he explains that they make an album to promote a tour. At the time of their last tour, they were advised to bring out another compilation album because it would make more money. "Everyone thought it would sell a lot of records and we were going, fuck, yeah, we might as well."

I tell him that what I like about this album, what makes it different, is that it's so personal. I expect him to say that is rubbish, that I'm reading all sorts of things into them that weren't intended. But he doesn't. "Yeah, it is personal, a lot of it. . ." He quickly covers his tracks. "Of course, there's a lot of comedy in it as well. I tried to make the rock songs quite comedic."

Look, I say, if you strip away a few songs, you've basically got the story of your life. The album could easily be turned into Jagger: the Musical. The album is about an older man looking back on his libidinous life and totting up the cost as he is left alone. He's right, there is plenty of humour, and the album is all the more personal for it. In songs such as Oh No Not You Again, and She Saw Me Coming, just as he's about to put his life in order, he glimpses another chick and is off on the chase again. He portrays himself as a victim of tempresses rather than a man who fails to take responsibility for his actions.

At the core of the album, though, is an overwhelming and specific melancholy. In The Biggest Mistake, he sings: "Acted unkind, took her for granted, played with her mind, she didn't deserve it, I left it too late, I walked out the door and left her to her fate." In the most self-lacerating and despairing song, Laugh, I Nearly Died, Jagger heaves with existential nausea. "I've been wandering, feeling all alone, I lost my direction, and I lost my home. I'm so sick and tired, now I'm on the slide. Feel so despised. When you laugh - laugh? - I almost died." It fades out to a desperate chorus, calling for guidance.

This seems much more your album than Keith's, I say. "It wouldn't be kind or politic of me to say," he answers, which seems to be pretty close to an affirmative. I go through the lyrics with Jagger and present my case like a second-rate barrister. See, I say, isn't this the story of your life?

"The whole pallete," he says in that slightly mocking way, felling each syllable as he goes. I'm not sure whether he is mocking me or himself. I'm not sure that he knows. He may do maudlin on the album, but he's not about to do it in person. "Yes," he says, "hopefully there's a lot of humour and not too much pathos, not too much self-pitying."

But there is plenty of regret here? He nods. "There is a lot of regret," he says. But he seems put out that people might want it contextualised in terms of his life. "I was talking to the guy from the LA Times yesterday and he was just banging on about Biggest Mistake and I was becoming very embarrassed about it, very English. He was saying it's a very personal thing, and I felt like saying, yeah, but at the end . . ." He becomes incoherent as he attempts to explain the relationship between his songs and life. "I mean, yes - [he snaps the word] - it is very personal. Erm. Why? Not all of it is, but there are songs that are very personal. I pointed this out to the guy: I said, if you're going to start doing this analysis, you've got to let me do the analysis as well."

Do it, I say - nothing would please me more. He mutters something about the writer never doing a good analysis of his own work.

I still can't take my eyes off his waist. "What size waist have you got?" I blurt out. "It's tiny."

"Twenty-eight," he says. "I'm trying to put weight on drinking Guinness. What's your waist?"

"Thirty-two," I say, giving myself the benefit of considerable doubt.

"That's not so different," he says.

"Four inches is massive."

"What's four inches between friends?" He laughs, deep and dirty. He's happier swapping double-entendres than emotional truths.

How much do you weigh?

"Ten stone. I'm trying to put on weight."

Really?

"Yes, I'm trying to put on two pounds. That's my ambition."

What does he eat? "Everything. But I really am trying to put on two more pounds," he repeats. "But I've been doing so much working out, and all that dancing."

Jagger grew up in suburban south London. He studied at the LSE before becoming a rock star. His father, Joe, was a PE teacher turned college lecturer, his mother, Eva, a housewife. His father is now 93, and is still a huge influence on his life. Jagger says he taught him how to apply himself, and how to distribute his energies best.

Is his dad like him? "No. He worked a lot harder than I do. But I think people did in those days. I don't think they got time off." He seems hazy on the details of normal working life.

I ask him what his knighthood means to him. "Not much. My father was very proud. I felt very good for him." But I'm sure it pleased Jagger just as much as his dad. These days, he is seen at the polo and the cricket, mingling with society friends.

How come he is the only Stone with a knighthood? "Yes. They - should - all - have - one." He answers as if by rote, like a sarcastic schoolboy. "Wouldn't that be lov-ely?"

Did he ever consider himself to be a rebel, or was he just selling an image to the public? He thinks hard before answering. Yes, of course, he was a well-brought-up boy; yes, he was slumming it for our benefit; but at the same time he really was kicking against the pricks. "Before we got famous, we were rebellious on our own minor level because we were very frustrated because we were playing all this blues music and nobody wanted it. So we went fuck you and your fucking old jazz, because it was a terrible music scene with all these old farts playing clarinets. . . The record companies were ghastly Dickensian organisations. Nobody knew what they were doing. And they didn't want to pay you, so we were very rebellious against that, and the rest of it just came naturally after that. So it wasn't such a leap into doing it on camera, so to speak."

The Stones were certainly exploited early on. It has often been said that this accounts for Jagger's later financial acumen (or meanness, depending on your perspective). The tales of parsimony are legion. Bianca Jagger claimed that they lived out of a suitcase to avoid paying income tax; when Jerry Hall demanded a £30m divorce settlement, he argued that their marriage was invalid as they had failed to lodge the required documents and eventually agreed to pay her £7m out of his estimated £190m fortune. He made the Stones pull out of dates in England on their last tour because the tax laws had changed to their disadvantage. Jagger has never been a popular man or easy to like. But to expect him to be so would be perverse; his appeal was always his arrogance, his carnality, his apparent cruelty. For a while, in the 1960s, he even projected himself as a contemporary Satan.

When I was growing up I felt a bond with Mick Jagger. I didn't have his money or his talent or his looks, but I did have big lips. I was ridiculed at school, but when I came home I was happy to do my Jagger impressions in the bedroom mirror. Did he have the piss taken out of his lips? "Yeah of course."

What did they call him at school? "Many things. Heheh."

Go on, you can be politically incorrect with me, I say. "Well, no, I'm not gonna be. No, they used to call me the n-word . . . My father used to apologise to me for giving them to me. I'd inherited them from his side of the family." I tell him his lips don't look as thick as they used to, and ask if they are receding. "That's what happens to you when you get older. My son has a very big mouth, too."

It's funny how so many people try to thicken their lips these days, I say. "Yeah! With collagen!" he laughs triumphantly.

I return to the album, quoting more of his lyrics back at him. On the single Streets of Love, he sings: "The awful truth is awful sad, I must admit I was awful bad." Is this his mea culpa, his grand apology to all the women he's screwed over? "Nooooah! Haha!"

But plenty of women have said that as a lover and a husband, he left a lot to be desired. My question comes out wrong - I mean that he has not been the most stalwart partner, not that he is a poor lover (though Marianne Faithfull always insisted that Richards was better in bed). His response is instant - petulant and hurt. "Yeah, I've had others say how greeeeaaaat I was, don't forget."

He seems to be getting impatient. He tells me of a journalist who visited him the other day and blurted out: "So tell me, how many times have you been in love?" He makes it sound like the maddest question in the world. But there is a reason he was asked it: a while ago, he was asked a similar question, and he replied, "I've never been deeply, madly in love. I'm just not an emotional person." It seemed a desperately sad answer.

You know what I think people will ask when they hear the album, I say. "Yeah?" he says with a rush of enthusiasm.

Is the album your way of asking Jerry to get back with you?"

He looks shocked.

"Ah well, that's not the message intended," he says tersely.

Does he think he's going to have to go around telling people that things are not really so bad, he's not that lonely, he's doing OK? He looks worried. "Well, you're the first person that's talked to me about it. Everyone else has talked about guitar parts and things . . . You want people to have empathy - not with you, but you want them to resonate, and think, 'That could be me.' Like if you go and watch a movie, you put yourself in the position of the hero. So, as a writer, you don't want them to think about you, they're supposed to be thinking about themselves."

Often the two go together, I say. "Yeah," he concedes reluctantly.

The press officer walks in to announce there are only five minutes left. Jagger looks relieved. "It's getting a bit Woman's Own," he says to her.

Is he surprised that the Stones are still a working band? "Yeah, kind of, but I've got used to it." It is amazing that so many of you have survived to tell the tale, I say. "A-ma-zing!" he says in his mocking schoolboy voice.

Which of the dead rockers does he miss most?

"I think John Lennon I miss the most. I was pretty friendly with him. He was talented and funny, and acerbic and to the point. Yeah, I miss him most."

I ask him what he feels when he looks at footage of his younger self. Was he really as cocky . . .

". . . as it looks?" He grins. "Yes."

Did he not have any doubts? "No," he says. "You have a lot of self-doubt when you're in your teens, then it sort of goes away."

And what about now? Is he as sure of himself today as he was back then? "Pretty much so. . ." he says before trailing off.

• A Bigger Bang is out now on Virgin

Guardian Unlimited © Guardian Newspapers Limited 2005