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Keith Richards on His New Box Set, the Next Stones LP and Who Really Inspired ‘You Don’t Move Me’

The guitarist also weighs in on the Black Lives Matter protests: “It’s about bloody time”

By Kory Grow



Keith Richards talks the new Rolling Stones album, his 'Live at the Hollywood Palladium' LP, Chuck Berry, Black Lives Matter and more.

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It’s late September, and [Keith Richards](#) is back at work after a six-month pause. He boasts that his temperature clocked in at 97.8 degrees (“I’m chilling,” he says) when he arrived at Manhattan’s Germano Studios to resume work on the [Rolling Stones](#)’ next album. “I realized coming into the studio yesterday that I was in this room in very early March, and we were just doing what we were doing and the next day, shit hit the fan,” he says with a big laugh. “So yesterday I had that déjà vu feeling. At the moment, I’m just overjoyed to be working. There’s not a lot of work out there, you know?”

Earlier this year, the Stones rushed out “Living in a Ghost Town,” a moody, soulful rocker about surviving in lockdown. They had already recorded it for the album, but Richards says they put it out early because “it just felt so damn appropriate.” Richards lives in the U.S. while Mick Jagger stayed in Europe, so the pair have been writing songs remotely, sending each other ideas for songs. “We’re communicating from across the Atlantic and then waiting

for a vaccine,” the guitarist says, then he jokes, “I have thousands of songs. I got enough to keep me busy.”

Another project that has occupied Richards’ time recently is a box-set reissue of *Live at the Hollywood Palladium*. He cut the concert recording with his backing band, the X-Pensive Winos, toward the end of a short tour in 1988, following the release of his solo debut, *Talk Is Cheap*. At the time, the Stones seemed on the verge of a breakup. They had released a studio album, *Dirty Work*, in 1986, but did not tour in support of it; Jagger instead went back into the studio and recorded his second solo album, *Primitive Cool*, and hit the road himself, prompting a war of words in the press between him and Richards, who wanted the Stones to tour.

The guitarist then linked up with drummer Steve Jordan for *Talk Is Cheap*, which contained two mainstream rock radio hits, the upbeat “Take It So Hard” and “You Don’t Move Me,” a moody farewell that seemed to be directed at Jagger. When Richards took the Winos on the road, they played every song from that record, as well as selections from the Stones’ catalogue that Richards had sung. Highlights from *Live at the Hollywood Palladium* included *Talk Is Cheap*’s “Take It So Hard” and “Locked Away,” as well as *Dirty Work*’s reggae number “Too Rude,” an extended jam on Richards’ signature tune “Happy,” and a rendition of “Time Is On My Side” sung by Sarah Dash, formerly of Patti Labelle’s group the Bluebelles. The reissue adds three tracks that weren’t on the original *Hollywood Palladium* release, including “You Don’t Move Me” and two Stones numbers — a hard-rocking rendition of “Little T&A,” off *Tattoo You*, and their Lennon and McCartney–penned second single, 1963’s “I Wanna Be Your Man,” which the Winos performed as a sing-along.

When Richards thinks back on that concert and that time in his life now, he feels pride. “The Winos have a special place in the heart of the old Keith,” he says. “At the time, I had no idea that album was actually recorded. I was so glad that suddenly, ‘Hey, we had that one.’ There’s a *great* band on it.”

You’re working on Stones music and soon you’ll be meeting up with the Winos’ Steve Jordan as well. How are you challenging yourself musically these days?

I gave up challenging myself. I mean, let’s face it. This is a funny year, man. They haven’t made one like it before. So this is all improvisation and just figuring out.

What’s been the hardest part of quarantining?

There are no crowds, it’s a damn hassle for a band. But hey, it’s young bands that are cut off from doing their gigs, the *bam, bam, bam*. It’s a hard pull, this one. Somehow, we got to get around it, because what we do is play music to people. And so in that case you need people. There’s rather a lack of them at the moment. So we’re trying to deal with it like anybody else, man, you know?

You might not be able to play concerts now, but you can at least appreciate some of the gigs you played in the past, like the one on the *Hollywood Palladium* album. What strikes you when you think about that time in your life now?

What happened to Mick and I, at just about the same time, is somehow you kind of felt trapped with being just in the Rolling Stones. I mean, just joking, but what an *extravagance*. But at the same time, [we] were like that, and this period was for me, [it was great] to work with another bunch of guys totally differently. It was like, “Hey, this reminds me of 15 years ago.” And I never expected to be able to pull such a lineup of musicians together.

What was it about Steve Jordan and you that clicked?

At that time in the Eighties, Charlie Watts had said to me, “It looks like there’s going to be a bit of a break coming up [for the Stones]. And if you’re going to work with anybody else, Steve Jordan’s your man.” So first off, the Winos are already created by Charlie Watts, in a weird way. What I didn’t realize when Steve and I did get together was that we could also blossom into songwriting and much more areas than I expected. So I was just taking one drummer’s advice about another drummer at the time. But once Steve and I started working, we realized that we had a lot more room to maneuver. And that we could stand each other.

On *Live at the Hollywood Palladium*, you joke that you’ve been thrown off the Palladium stage before. Chuck Berry tossed you off it in 1972, though he later claimed he didn’t recognize you. Is that what you were referencing?

Yes, yes, yes. I’ve almost thrown Chuck off, too [*laughs*]. But Chuck and I had a real relationship. We ended up loving each other, but we had to show that we really didn’t like each other, because ... I don’t know why. I was so proud to work with that man. And to be able to give him a good band [for the *Hail! Hail! Rock ‘n’ Roll* concert film] was just a labor of love. You just love this stuff, and you love what other guys who’ve given to you, and you’re just really happy that you can pass it on.

You once said that Chuck had no gauge on his worth or his impact. How do you understand *your* worth and impact on music?

I don’t. I’m only aware of it because people tell me. I understand Chuck’s thing. Chuck has no pretensions about it. He’d just go, “Up in the mornin’ and out to school.” [*Sings riff.*] “Johnny B. Goode.” [*Sings riff.*] Man, he was putting out stuff, but he didn’t have these pretensions about it being culturally important or anything. He was just writing about shit that was going on that day, and he just happened to do it incredibly brilliantly, without knowing. “Memphis, Tennessee” is one of the most beautiful bits of poetry I’ve heard. To Chuck, it was just knocking out another ditty. But the guy that’s doing it doesn’t have to know how fantastic it is.

Well, it’s too bad he didn’t appreciate it.

I think towards the end of his life, he started to realize how important his work had been, and that’s a beautiful thing. But he had no pretensions about it. Chuck Berry’s up there without a doubt. Nobody could write them like that, man. I mean, you want rock & roll? There it is with a band. He had the perfect band, the perfect studio. They rock. And you know, I can say no more; I’m out of superlatives.

One of the songs you played at the Palladium, “Big Enough,” has a cool James Brown groove. You saw him live many times, at the Apollo and on *The T.A.M.I. Show*. What did you learn from watching him?

James for us, especially for Mick, was a real attraction. That’s because Mick is the frontman, and he’s got to stand on a tiny little stage, and he wants to move. To hear James Brown and to see how he dealt with that was great, because James didn’t use a lot of the stage; he used a little small spot, and Mick learnt that he was an expert at it. I’ve always said to Mick, “You run around too much. You should stay in that little circle because you can move there.” It’s a unique thing. James Brown also had an extremely hip band. It was very tight. We’re playing Chicago blues, which is sort of a different groove, but there it is: you have Mick and James Brown automatically seemed to be made out of the same mold really.

You have always been a huge champion for black musicians and black artists.

They're the reason I'm here.

What do you make of the Black Lives Matter protests around the world this year?

It's about bloody time. I mean, in this country [the U.S.], things are coming to a head. That's the way it is. You got to deal with it. It's difficult for me to talk about it, because I am not an American. I live here, I am in heart and soul, I am one of you, but I can't interfere. I'm like Putin, I refuse to interfere in your electoral process.

You once said the Winos felt like the Stones in the early days, "because nobody has any respect for anybody, except for when they do well." What did you mean by that?

[Laughs]. I'll stand by it. Nobody was picking bones about each other; everybody was just trying to make the whole band better. But I guess what I was trying to say is, in the bands I've been in, the individual is the least consideration; it's the sum of the parts that count. It's how some guys know that they're adding to something and not trying to sort of pull themselves out. I don't know if it's an ego thing, but some of the great bands are great bands because that problem has been resolved.

Waddy Wachtel, the Winos' guitarist, plays brilliantly on this recording. Do you feel he's able to weave guitars the way that you talk about doing with Brian Jones and with Ronnie Wood?

Oh, Mr. Wachtel? Yes, man, he was my absolute choice. He was the other guy I'd always wanted to work with, ever since I heard him play. And the Winos was a great excuse for me to work him. I love his sense of melodies, the way he can pick up on a song. And I love everything about the asshole [laughs]. He's an amazing musician, a great heart. If you're two guitar players in the band, you better get along, right?

He played a great solo on "Happy."

It's fantastic, man. That's why I wanted to work with him. I just feel very privileged myself to be in the Winos with that guy. It's higher level, man. That's the hidden tower of power back there. And [bassist] Charlie Drayton, are you kidding me? I'm talking chaos. [Saxophonist] Bobby Keys thrown in, as you know, I'm blessed, I was blessed with some of the most enthusiastic and open musicians to play with ever. And I'm still recovering.

And you had Sarah Dash, too, who sang "Make No Mistake" with you and "Time Is on My Side."

Sarah, how did I forget? She's the most beautiful lady in the world that I've known for, I don't know how long — the early Sixties when she was with Patti LaBelle and the Bluebells? It was such a pleasure to work back with Sarah and always. One love, Sarah.

At the Palladium, you performed "Connection," which was one of the first Stones songs you sang on. You sang in a choir as a kid, but was it hard finding your rock voice?

It came basically by writing songs with the Stones and with Mick. I'd say, "It goes like this," and then Mick would take it over, but sometimes he came and Mick would say to me, "Hey, you take this one" or, "Oh, sing harmonies." So I basically started doing the harmonies with Mick on, I don't know, maybe the first one was "The Last Time" and "Tell Me," which I thought was terrible, but other people love it. Also, because I write the songs and the music, I have to sing the songs to Mick in the first place, so he'd know what to do.

So singing was an actual natural thing to me, learning guitar was work [*laughs*]. But no, music's music. There's singing and playing an instrument, there's very little difference in it. One, you use a voice, others, you use your fingers or whatever else is necessary to play the damn thing.

And the first song you sang by yourself in the Stones was “You Got The Silver.”

Yeah. None of those things happened by accident. We did it and Mick tried it, and at the end they said, “Oh, you do this one.” There was no hassle or anything. It was just like subdividing the labor.

When *Talk Is Cheap* came out, you said you had a new respect for what Mick does onstage. What did the whole experience teach you about being a frontman?

Suddenly, you're the frontman, and suddenly you're realizing the pressure that you can feel by just being that one in the front there. I absolutely understood what Mick, or any frontman, can go through. In the Stones, I could push forward or sit back; you have that option being the guitar player. With the Winos, I realized that the frontman has no option, and you just got to do it, even if your voice is gone. So I realized then, the pressures that are on a frontman, and I've never forgotten.

What were the biggest lessons that you took from working with Mick all those years into *Talk Is Cheap*?

A sense of relief, actually [*laughs*]. No, it was just different. The whole thing of being the Stones, how fantastic is it to be in the Stones and to have this thing going, but it's also a monster. And I think around this time that I did this, and Mick did his ... whatever he did, we just felt the need to sort of just work outside of the factory for a while. Then we'd come back and then it would help the Stones, and it did. By *Steel Wheels* and *Voodoo Lounge*, it all sort of worked out. But I guess we just needed to blow it off, man.

At the time seemed you had directed “You Don't Move Me” at Mick. What are the boundaries you have to respect to kind of keep the peace these days?

Oh, there are no boundaries. There'll always be another screwup. Don't worry about it; it's the Rolling Stones for Christ's sake [*laughs*]. But many can roll with the punches.

And the weirdest thing is that when I wrote “You Don't Move Me,” actually it wasn't about what everybody thinks it's about. It just became obvious, but it wasn't about that. It just sort of went that way.

What was it about then?

I won't mention her name. All right?

In 1977, while you were awaiting trial for your Toronto drug bust, you recorded a number of solo songs that were heavily bootlegged. You performed some of them with Ron Wood's band, the New Barbarians, but would you ever want to release those recordings officially since they're quite legendary?

Sometimes I just love them for being bootlegs. I loved doing that stuff and I don't even know how that shit escaped, but at the same time I didn't mind it. And then when I found out other people liked it, I learned, hey, we should bootleg me some more. But whether I'd put it out, I think a bootleg isn't a bootleg if you put it out. But that is still an idea. I'll kick that one around.

Around that time, the United States government helped you out and let you come down here to kick your heroin addiction.

Absolutely. Hey, I have a great respect for this country. They really came through for me and let me get my act together. They were wonderful. I ain't going to charge them.

America's opioid epidemic has been in the news here lately. What do you feel people here should know about that? What should the country be doing?

Well, opioids are not opiates; that's a pill problem. You have a problem with pharmaceutical companies, not with drugs. Everybody knows you can go across to Canada and pick up the same thing for five bucks and here, you're paying hundreds. You can figure it out, right?

Generally speaking, what rules do you live by?

As few as possible, my boy.

What rules do you live by when you're writing songs?

When you're writing songs, there are no fucking rules. In fact, you're looking to break them. You're looking to sort of find the next missing chord. You're looking to find the next best way to express things. Writing songs is not about the lyrics one side and music on another. It's about the two coming together. And you can be a great poet and you might write some lovely music, but the art and the beauty of writing songs is to pull those two together, where they seem to love each other, and that's writing songs.

Do you think much about hooks and bridges?

Only when they get in the way.

What makes a great riff?

It should be spontaneous and absolutely the guy that's actually doing it [shouldn't] know where it comes from. It just appears at your fingertips and is coming out of the instrument. And that is a great riff, totally unthought about, unstructured, no rules, no nothing. It's just, one minute it ain't there, and the next minute, there it is. [*Sings "Satisfaction" riff.*]

Didn't you literally dream that one?

Yes. That's what I mean. It's better than sleep. Riffs are not supposed to be thought about; they're just supposed to be felt and delivered.

And you dreamt the riff to "Make No Mistake," too.

Man, all of it probably [*laughs*]. No, actually I did work quite hard on that, but there was a lovely chord sequence there that just fascinated me, and I still love it. Musicologists still can't figure out what it is. Some asked me, what's this chord I play in the middle there? I mean, I don't know. Yeah, it was the closest I got to the "lost chord." I mean, so far.

You've said in the past you had trouble figuring out a Scotty Moore lick in Elvis' "I'm Left, You're Right, She's Gone."

Yeah. There are a few floating about, and we're looking for them.

Is there much new rock & roll that's moving you lately?

There is no new rock & roll [*laughs*]. It's pointless. There's great musicians and some great singers and stuff. Unfortunately, to me, in music, it's been synthesized to death. Once you start synthesizing things, you're not getting the real thing. But I don't want to go into a long

discourse on what's wrong with synthesizers and music these days, except to say they're cheap and corny [*laughs*].

You once said, "To me, it's important to prove that [rock music] isn't just teenage kids' shit and you should feel embarrassed when you're over 40 and still doing it." You said you wanted to advance the music and move things forward. Do you feel you've done that?

Well, I don't know. Bobby Keys, my great old friend, called it "grown men's music" because rock & roll was only considered new because everything has to have a sort of a genesis, so to speak. And I suppose rock & roll, in the general scope of things, you put it say [it caught on in] '55, '56, and the whole lot of it was just novelty stuff, and a lot of musicians for quite a few years thought that it's another novelty. It was just like the cha-cha-cha or the twist. Now we know different.

It's sort of different with like something the blues. With the blues, as an artist gets older, they get more appreciation.

You are an astute man. The blues is what it's all about and what it's all embedded on. All popular music, ever since they've been able to record it, is based on the blues. You go from ragtime, jazz, it's all based on the blues. It doesn't mean that you got to understand every country blues, Blind Lemon Jefferson song, but the order of them is all based on that. And then it progresses from that, which is a wonderful thing.

I mean, you want to know what black people have done for the world, man? Just listen to the music. It's an expression, and it touches everybody. It touches whites and yellows and little hairy things, I don't know, but that's what it's about. It's about touching people and recording has made that possible. And throughout the history of this music, recorded music, the influence of the blues is just massive. It just takes different shades. In the swing music in the Thirties and Forties, Louis Armstrong, I mean, do I have to ramble on?

No. Do you feel like you're still learning things about the blues?

As long as it's not dead, there'll always be something to learn about it. Sometimes it's far too many people *trying* to play it, but at the same time, that *is* the human condition.

A few years ago, in a documentary about you, titled *Under the Influence*, Steve Jordan said you were considering retirement before you made your *Crosseyed Heart* solo album. Obviously, that didn't take. What are your thoughts on that now?

Well, the other thing about show business is you sometimes hint at doing something that you have no intention of doing, right? It's part of the flimflam, man. But it's quite possible that I did say to Steve, "Jesus Christ, man, that was a terrible night, I'm going to stuff it." Sometimes, you say things like that. I'm not saying it ain't true or anything. But there's a difference between saying something and meaning it.

In the late Eighties, you said, "It's not that easy to be Keith Richards, but it's also not so hard either. The main thing is to know yourself." How do you know yourself?

There's a few bits missing since the Eighties [*laughs*]. Less parts to know, but listen man, we're all stuck here trying to figure out what life is. I guess what I was trying to say then is, when you've quite inadvertently been in the public eye since you were 19, it's difficult sometimes for people to correlate it with who they actually are. And I found it incredibly helpful to know who the fuck I am [*laughs*]. I'm not worried about the other bloke, and the outside stuff. You can't just, flimflam your way through this, man. This year, I'm turning 77

for Christ sake. I know it, I don't give a shit. I'm very proud of it. And I'm still trying to know myself a bit better. And, but things change as you know, as you go on. Nothing's static.

Do you remember when you got that kind of confidence?

You got to find out for yourself. Everybody's different. And I have no idea. I know that as people, we could do a lot better and I would like to promote that. But it's all, it's up to us collectively. Everybody has to do a little better, whatever it is. That's my sermon for the day.