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## Rolling Stones: In the 1960s

(Pride)  
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By **Jeff Carter**

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The career of The Rolling Stones in the '60s began and ended with events which serve to foreground the band's knack for fortuitous timing and their willingness to mingle with the darker undercurrents of the times, qualities which would help define them. In October 1960, Keith Richards spied former schoolmate Mike Jagger on the platform of Dartford Station in Kent. Jagger was carrying an armful of import rock and blues albums, and the two teens shared their mutual admiration for this music. Richards was invited to jam with Jagger's then informal combo, and this chance encounter began an association which would identify itself as the Rolling Stones by the summer of 1962.



AMAZON

Nine years later, in December 1969, the Stones performed an ill-fated free concert at the Altamont Speedway, finishing an otherwise massively successful return to the tour circuit with an event that has since been commonly regarded as the watershed end of an era. The years between had seen the musical enthusiasms of Jagger and Richards—joined with Charlie Watts, Bill Wyman, and original group leader Brian Jones—coalesce as a rock band which would not only enjoy a remarkable run of classic singles and albums, but also, along with The Beatles and Bob Dylan, be at the forefront of the cultural arm of a multi-faceted youth movement, contributing in important ways to massive social and political upheavals which assumed a world-historical character.

Pretty heady stuff. So to see the tag "Complete Review" applied to a less than three-hour documentary set about the Rolling Stones and the '60s, a subject which has produced a library's worth of material without yet exhausting the subject, seems a tall order. There is, however, another way to understand the claim—one that makes the presentation a little more modest in its intent. This two-disc package is in fact a reissue of separate releases which appeared as part of an ongoing series of rock documentaries known loosely as "Under Review" (for the record, these titles are *The Rolling Stones: Under Review 1962-1966* and *The Rolling Stones: Under Review 1967-1969*).

So these are the complete "Under Review" productions covering the eventful '60s portion of the Stones' ridiculously long and storied career; a set which is also, as noted on the back cover, "not authorized by the Rolling Stones, their management or record label". While this may appear to promise a hard-hitting critical appraisal – true to a limited degree – it also serves as warning that direct access to band members and close

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associates (not to mention extensive audio and visual archives) are not part of the package.

The first disc features the program covering years 1962-1966. It is a rather straightforward chronological account, highlighting key recordings and supplemented with contextual information about important influences such as Chuck Berry, Buddy Holly and Howling Wolf. The interview subjects, original bassist Dick Taylor and journalist Nigel Williamson among them, manage to set the scene in which the Stones worked and emphasize the musical development from distinct covers to outstanding original songs. Strong points include an explanation of how the blues influenced their direction, the unique qualities of their sound, and the importance to their career of the intuitive decision making of manager Andrew Loog Oldham.

The second program comes off as a bit slicker, and the focus shifts to more emphasis on the social dynamics of the period and its affect on the band's work. In place of individual recordings, the documentary's structure is shaped by analysis of the four albums released between 1967 and 1969. *Their Satanic Majesties Request*, as an example, rather than the rote dismissal, is championed in the context of other psychedelic albums of the period. Other strong points include the re-emergence of American roots music influencing Keith Richards' songwriting, and the importance of producer Jimmy Miller to the band's new sound in 1968. The many facets of the decline of Brian Jones, both as a Rolling Stone and as a person, is also well handled.

There's understandably a lot to the story that is left out. The band's determined recruitment of Charlie Watts, which played out over some months in 1963, was maybe the savviest move they ever made (his drumming is integral to their sound). The Stones were road warriors through their first three or four years, playing a staggering amount of shows including four US tours and trips to the Far East. The shift in management from Loog Oldham to Allen Klein is never mentioned, though the eventual fallout from that would have a profound influence on the band's outlook and direction for the rest of their career.

The productions in general have a coherent narrative line, concentrating on the music, with plenty of room for interesting digressions. There are a few editorial slipups. The first album is described as creating "a new attitude...an album could be something in its own right", but shortly thereafter we are informed that the Stones were essentially a singles band in their early days. On the first disc, Brian Jones' multi-instrumental contributions on the album *Aftermath* are lauded as a last great contribution before his rapid decline, but on the second disc his contributions to *Their Satanic Majesties Request* takes on the role of final creative burst before his personal implosion. Some information, such as a thematic comparison of the compositions of Ray Davies and Jagger/Richards, gets repeated in the two programs.

Overall, though the slipcase is well-designed, there's a sort of budget feel to the productions. The menus, for example, look like an unmodified DVD Studio Pro template – and the simplest one at that. While the interviews never fall below professional standards, some on the first disc are set in a black studio environment with unfortunate colored orbs spinning in the background. The sound design, while serviceable, is basic. The visuals, except for a few shots on the second disc, are limited to interview talking heads, archival photos, and archival television and motion picture footage (with the licensing information superimposed on the screen).

That said, independent productions cannot be expected to have unlimited resources, and the rights to audio-visual materials can be insanely expensive. With that in mind, it appears the producers spent the budget available to them wisely. The archival materials, if from relatively limited sources and sometimes overly familiar, appear often enough and are integrated dynamically into the body of the work. The promise of rare and previously unseen footage is fulfilled. The interview subjects are mostly well chosen and generally have something useful to contribute.

The extras are a little sparse. The "extended interviews" run less than six minutes, the "special feature" is two minutes, and the contributor biographies – while useful – are really just a few sentences placed beside a photograph. And one would have to have a lot of free time on one's hand to bother with the "interactive Stones quiz".

Remarkably, while there has been any number of performance-based Rolling Stones films over the years, there's a dearth of this type of chronological documentary (*25X5: The Continuing Adventures of The Rolling Stones*, an officially sanctioned production released in 1989, is all that comes to mind). On the other hand, it could be argued that the Rolling Stones have always best been captured in the two famous direct cinema documents, the Maysles' *Gimme Shelter* and Robert Frank's



*Cocksucker Blues*. Regardless, the Stones are such a complex entity on many levels -- musical, cultural, as personalities and celebrities -- that the array of books, films, recordings, articles, interviews and so on will likely expand on into the future.

This DVD then, while certainly not definitive, holds its own in support of other materials (like Bill Wyman's excellent memoir, or Stephen Davis' book, or the contemporary commentary of music writers such as Robert Christgau and Greil Marcus). Enthusiasts will appreciate particular insights and archival finds, while those less versed in the Rolling Stones, who perhaps understand them only as grizzled stadium performers with a string of classic rock hits, will likely be surprised by the vitality present in these early years.

RATING: 

EXTRAS RATING: 

— 20 January 2010

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