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Review: 'The Rolling Stones Under Review 1975-1983' A Compelling Examination Of An Overlooked Era

REVIEWS BY KEVIN JAGERNAUTH NOVEMBER 22, 2012 10:00 AM 4 COMMENTS

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As The Rolling Stones tumble into their fiftieth year, it's easy to be cynical about the aging band, as they [desperately try to stay relevant](#), even as rock 'n roll has evolved and moved on. Oh sure, nostalgia will sell out stadiums, as will the fact that they are living legends, but it's easy to forget that at one time they were the biggest and arguably most important rock 'n roll band on the planet. The lengthily titled documentary "The Rolling Stones Under Review 1975-1983: The Ronnie Wood Years Pt. 1" (pew) is the latest in an ongoing series of docs about the band (this is the first one I've seen), that tracks their journey a few years at time in great detail. And when we catch up with them in 1975, it could be said the band was likely in no greater peril at any other time in their history.

It's the mid-'70s and seemingly everything is in tumult. Around them, the landscape is changing, with punk emerging from the musical fringes, disco on the way, new wave not long over the horizon, and the early days of hip hop not much further off. Internally, Mick Taylor has left the band, Keith Richards is in the throes of heroin addiction, and Mick Jagger is left to keep the ship steady and on course, and his command easily explains the group's forays into popular trends of the time. Even with ex-Faces member Ronnie Wood joining the group -- viewed by many as a safe and even-less-dynamic player than Taylor (though perhaps a bit unfairly) -- The Rolling Stones begin a slow shift away from their R&B roots towards a "contemporary" sound. Did it work? Not all the time.

The basic posit of 'Under Review' lays out is that these eight years of the Stones were among their patchiest, but when the songs -- and occasional album -- worked, it showcased a band that hadn't lost their hitmaking



touch. So sure, *Black & Blue* is a bit all over the place, but it's still the LP that lets it loose with "Hey Negrita" and goes full-on funk with "Hot Stuff." But when the band had their backs against the wall, it seemed that's when they would deliver their choicest material. With Richards arrested for drug possession in Canada in 1977 (and facing a possible jail term -- he was eventually given a light sentence and ordered to play a charity concert), the sessions for *Some Girls* had an added urgency. With Wood now fully integrated, the Rolling Stones ditched their standard array of guest musicians and stuck to their core players, and the result was their best album since *Exile On Main Street* (also made during a time of turbulence).

In many ways *Some Girls* found the band both pushing forward sonically to keep with the times ("Miss You," "Shattered," "Respectable"), and also sticking to their structural blues roots, resulting in a unique and winning hybrid of styles. But it would never be as harmonious as it was on this album. With Richards getting sober, he was eager to get involved again in the day-to-day operations of the band, but Jagger, who had the reins for years while his Glimmer Twin was out of control, wasn't ready to cede power. And thus, a power struggle -- personally, professionally and creatively -- emerged between the two, which can certainly be felt on subsequent albums.

Aside from the title track, *Emotional Rescue* more or less felt like a tame and reheated version of *Some Girls*. But again, the band could pull it together when they needed to, and with a tour looming, and despite the internal conflicts, *Tattoo You* -- essentially an album cobbled together from song scraps from previous sessions and taken over the finish line -- again found a reinvigorated group, delivering top form rock 'n roll. But by the time *Undercover* arrived, personal problems again put The Rolling Stones back to treading water.



Assembling an impressive array of talented and opinionated talking-head talent -- Village Voice's Robert Christgau, ex-Rolling Stone magazine editor Anthony De Curtis, Mojo magazine's Barney Hoskins, Uncut magazine's Nigel

Williamson and more -- along with a solid use of archival footage, concert tapes, music videos (many of which you probably haven't seen in years) and more, 'Under Review' isn't going to win any prizes for visuals or even structure, but it puts together a pretty comprehensive package of info. And while most fans of the band will likely already know many of these stories, there are still a few nuggets you might have missed, and the film is so concisely assembled that it's still worth taking a trip down memory lane.



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As one of the interview subjects notes, if you take the cream of the crop of The Rolling Stones' songs from '75-'83, it's hard to argue that it's not among their finest output. Indeed, by '75 the Stones had outlasted The Beatles, and it could be said they were in territory where no rock band had ever been before. They were nearly fifteen years into their career and still selling out massive stadium tours around the world -- even when record sales tumbled or critics scoffed. And as fads came and went, the Stones still (mostly) maintained an authenticity and cool, even if their attempts to change fashion sometimes fumbled. If anything, 'Under Review' puts together a strong enough case that it might be worth going back to some of the more ignored portions of their discography, and giving them another shot. [B]

----- "The Rolling Stones: Under Review 1975-1983: The Ronnie Wood Years Pt. 1" is now available on DVD.