

LIFE WITH A ROLLING STONE

In a new article for this issue, James Fox revisits his days as a writer on the Magazine, when he forged a friendship with Keith Richards, which led to them collaborating on the guitarist's memoir



The early '70s were heady days for a 27-year-old writer on this magazine. In a little more than a year before I met Keith Richards, I had been to Vietnam with Don McCullin, reported on the illegal (imagine) miners' union resisting Franco in Asturias, and written a cover story, with photographs by Eve Arnold, about the beautiful, arrogant young Parisian writer who was, 35 years later, to be at the epicentre of the Bettencourt scandal that rocked France last year — François-Marie Banier. Better, obviously, not to be a one-field specialist if you wanted to enjoy this rare moment in magazine journalism.

I had the idea to write about Keith's guitar playing in 1973 because nobody in the mainstream press, 10 years into the Stones, had written about how he got the unique sound from his guitar that drove the great riffs of his creation. One chord and you could tell it was Keith. Why could nobody imitate it? Jagger was the story, the lapping tongue, the dancing, prancing phenomenon, not Richards. So when a writer came along with this unlikely new angle of writing about his guitar playing, he agreed. The Stones were rehearsing for a European

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tour in Rotterdam; they'd just finished their album *Goats Head Soup* in Jamaica. Across a large aircraft hangar came Keith with a hustle of minders — half-man, half-crow, pale skin, bad teeth, very French Revolution. And very remote. As my piece recorded, he was furiously counting money. The only reason he had for carrying it — unreportable then — was to pay for the drugs he'd just scored.

Why couldn't anyone copy his guitar playing? I asked. "They don't know how to," he said. He was friendly, genial, unforbidding, which greatly surprised me. "I don't mind giving the technical secrets," he said, before explaining, quite simply, how he had reinvented the electric guitar. Keith told me that he decided almost instantly which people he's going to trust and let in. But the article, which delivered what I said it would, clearly helped. We spent time together again in 1976, on another European tour for which I was assigned to write a Review front piece for the

paper. They were rehearsing in a villa in Cannes. Ronnie Wood was now part of the band, he and Keith inseparable. I sat up with them through the night, 3am, 4am and onward — the only way to see Keith, since his breakfast time was around 6pm. My piece described him sitting "cross-legged in the middle of a pile of guitars crushing aspirins with his Cartier lighter". Cocaine, of course. How else could I work these ungodly hours? One early Saturday morning I had a piece to file for the business section on the finances of the Stones tour. I left Keith and Ronnie, armed with a little extra marching powder to help me through this sleepless dawn. I drank black coffee which, on top of the cocaine, had me hallucinating.

The gaps in time never mattered in friendship with Keith; you took up where you left off. In 1982 he had left Anita and heroin and taken up with Patti Hansen, his present wife, a model from Staten Island. I was invited to ride in their chopper with them, just the three of us, to

Wembley Stadium, on a warm June evening. Two days later I got the call again, this time to ride with Keith and his father, Bert, reunited after 20 years, on Bert's inaugural trip to a Stones gig, in Bristol. Keith and I sat in the back of the Daimler taking many refreshments; Bert was in front behind a partition. He asked the minder for light ale. Keith wound down the window. "What? On the Sabbath, Dad?" he said, and rolled back in laughter.

One day in 2005, we met in Redlands, the house in West Sussex he bought in 1966. In all the intervening years I had been trying to tell him, a rare teller of stories, that we had to get them on paper. Now the time was right. We talked for many hours over the next four years, and never at four in the morning. Initially I'd try and force the pace in my zeal for this extraordinary gig. Keith slowed me down. "Just paint in the background," he growled. "Broad brushstrokes. We've got time." ■ *Life (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, £20) by Keith Richards, with James Fox, is out now. It is available at the Sunday Bookshop for £15 inc. P&P. Tel: 0845 271 2135*