

Class Clash

The Beatles vs. The Rolling Stones

Mike Kerman

1969

a review of
the Rolling Stones, "The Beggars' Banquet" (London)
the Beatles, "The Beatles" (Apple)

The Beatles and Rolling Stones albums have been out for a couple of months now and we have a clearer perspective on what these, the super-est of the groups are up to.

When the Beatles' album first appeared my immediate reaction was that it would be pretentious for anyone to attempt to "review" it. The Beatles had released a new album, of course it was great, and what else could us "lowly types" say about it.

The Stones then released "Beggars' Banquet" after a few months of hassles about its cover. So taken was I with "The Beatles" that the Stones went undeservedly under-noticed. But now, some weeks later, my opinions have concretized and I have some things to say.

Some weeks before "The Beatles" was released an interview with John Lennon was published in the excellent bi-weekly rock magazine "Rolling Stone." Lennon said that what he really wanted to do was get back to the "real" rock and roll, the early stuff that reeked of Chuck Berry and Little Richard; hard music with a lot of balls.

When the Beatles album was released we heard their attempts. They started side one with "Back in the U.S.S.R." and included things like "Helter Skelter", "Everybody's Got Things to Hide..." and other hard material. But the album was a pastiche of styles, as glossy as their enclosed poster, adding up to beautiful "Beatlemusic." Certainly better than almost everything else released in months, the album had more things happening than a three-ring circus.

Everybody has their favorite songs and styles of the album. "Ob-la-di, Ob-la-da," "Rocky Raccoon," "Blackbird," and "Why Don't We Do It In the Road" are mine. But while everybody considered a few songs "classics," they also thought that a lot of the album just didn't make it, and while it was a good double album, it could have been a fantastic single album.

I found that after hearing it so many times when it was first released "The Beatles" grew tiring. And thinking back to Lennon's "Rolling Stone" statement, I realized that the Beatles could no longer "hack" rock and roll.

Their music is wonderful, great, beautiful and whatever other superlatives one would want to call it, but rock and roll, it ain't.

Don't get me wrong, whatever it is, I'll call it "Beatlemusic," it certainly is good to hear and they are undoubtedly the best at what they do.

This is where the Stones come in. Hearing "Beggars' Banquet" put things in perspective.

The Stones are still, and there might have been some doubt about it before, the kings of rock and nobody even comes close. They started out as bad, dirty, nasty, street boys and stayed that way after the Beatles and Brian Epstein put on brown suits, pink shirts and invaded America. They are still "rockers" while the Beatles have become "mods."

The Stones started out doing things like Chuck Berry numbers, “Little Red Rooster,” “Satisfaction” (my personal all-time favorite R&R song) and now, “Beggars’ Banquet.” It is their “Sgt. Pepper” and is their own revolutionary music.

The first song on the album “Sympathy for the Devil,” is a modern day “Satisfaction” and has more power, energy and balls in its six minutes than “The Beatles” ninety. That song alone drains me and leaves me wasted; I usually need a rest after hearing it.

It’s legal amphetamine in a record jacket. Jagger’s voice has never been better; the Stones never played harder. The album never comes down but keeps up a steel-hard edge. It’s rock and roll stripped naked of all bullshit and finery: the basic sounds—acoustic, electric, dobro guitar, heavy drumming, weird rhythm things (reminiscent of some of the things in “Between the Buttons”), Nicky Hopkins’ pounding shrill piano and that scruffy low-down Stones sound that they have had all these years—only better.

Whether singing about revolution (“Street Fighting Man”), violence (“Sympathy for the Devil”), or groupies (“Stray Cat Blues”), the Stones are very much aware of what is happening today.

They are waiting for a “Factory Girl” with her fat legs and scars, while the Beatles’ “working girl” (in “Honey Pie”) becomes a “legend of the silver screen” and is “driving them crazy.” The Stones sing to and for the “Salt of the Earth,” reflecting their backgrounds; the Beatles live in their beautiful, mythical, and self-enclosed Pepperland.

In “Beggars’ Banquet” the Stones’ music pumps, pounds, and moves, whether in the country vein of “Dear Doctor” or the old-time country blues of “Prodigal Son.” That song was taken almost directly from a 1930’s blues singer Robert Wilkin’s “That’s No Way To Get Along” (which can be heard on a Origin Jazz Library album “The Mississippi Blues, 1927–1940”).

The album never loses its power, and never gets dull or overdoes it, as so many “hard” and “heavy” American groups do. While many groups find a “sound” and beat it into the ground, the Stones, never losing their originality or the listeners’ interest, just get better.

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Fifth Estate #72, February 6 — 19, 1969

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