

Esquire

August 4, 2016

This New Rolling Stones Deluxe Release Highlights the Band's Last Great Period... In 1995

Perhaps Keith Richards should stop dredging up a decades-old rivalry with The Beatles.



Two weeks ago, Keith Richards gave an interview to England's Radio Times in which he claimed The Beatles were never in the same league as his beloved Rolling Stones as a live act.

"Musically, The Beatles had a lovely sound and great songs," he said. "But the live thing? They were never quite there."

Then, like some rock 'n' roll Donald Trump, Richards doubled down. After saying he'd "excommunicated" The Beatles as friends

after they took up with Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in 1968—which, of course, didn't prevent Richards from jumping at the chance to perform with John Lennon a few months later—he took another thinly veiled pot shot at the Fab Four.

"They're not really bands if they don't last—they're groups," he said. "We're a band, and a real band sticks until it dies. These bands, they become big, but they're generational—just for their one decade. They literally go when their testosterone goes."

Sadly, it's nothing new. Richards has been trying to elevate his band to peer status with The Beatles for years. In fact, it was a running theme throughout his memoir, *Life*. Whatever you think of the book—and Keith no doubt spins a world class yarn—it suffered for the constant, overreaching comparisons.

Despite the incessant Beatles vs. Stones debate amongst fans and critics alike, it was really never anything more than an ingenious marketing ploy by the Stones' early manager Andrew Loog Oldham to elevate his charges to the status of the Fabs' by making them a foil for the most popular band to ever walk the earth. The two groups gamely played along—and were close friends more than intense rivals—at the height of The Beatles' fame. But the near-perfect arc of The Beatles' career and the spotty nature of the Stones' own output over the years—not to mention the intervention of Father Time—saw to it that the debate is largely moot.

But seriously, who doesn't love Keith Richards? Even if he's become more of a caricature of what he thinks we expect him to be, more than anything else in recent years, he's still near the top of the heap of living rock 'n' roll icons, and half of one of the great songwriting partnerships of the golden age of rock. He's also a cunning salesman, and it shouldn't be lost on anyone that he was promoting a new documentary about his early life in post-World War II Britain that likely would have passed without much notice if he hadn't grabbed headlines with his Beatles-baiting statements.

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It also in no way detracts from the fact that the Rolling Stones became one of the best, and most lucrative, touring machines ever, with Mick Jagger's business savvy guiding the band into the modern era as an attraction that almost literally prints money as it traverses the globe.

But anyone who has seen the band—and I've seen them numerous times over the years since first catching them in Hartford in 1981—would be lying if they told you the Stones are at the top of their game these days. Sure, it's great to see them still out there, still at it as the self-

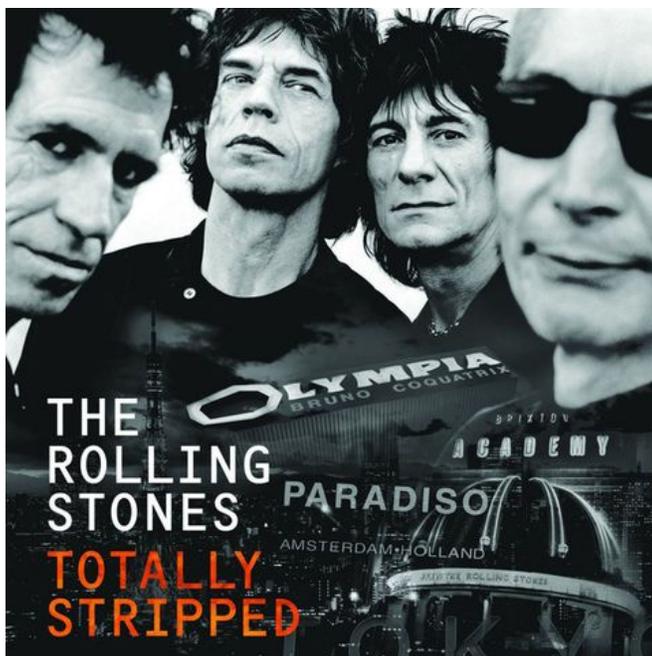


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proclaimed "World's Greatest Rock 'n' Roll Band." And they definitely still have their moments—shows in Japan and India in 2006, or even Rio in 2012 among them—but it's been a long time since they were truly relevant or a consistently great live act, as a new box set, *Totally Stripped*, makes painfully obvious.

1995, on the heels of the hugely lucrative Steel Wheels tour, the departure of original bassist Bill Wyman, and in the midst of the mega-grossing Voodoo Lounge tour, the Stones hit on a clever way to keep things fresh. Known for years for their tour kick-off shows at intimate venues, the band took that idea one step further, booking shows along the Voodoo Lounge tour in theaters to compliment the local enormo domes they were playing. The shows were announced with less than 24-hours notice, with fans queueing for hours for the scarce tickets and a chance to see their heroes playing an atypical set of deep cuts in venues a tenth of the size of their typical shows.

At the urging of longtime producer Don Was, the Stones also worked in some recording sessions along the way, laying down faithful, but live and stripped down, versions of some of their most intimate tracks.



Footage shot on the tour and during those sessions are what make up *Totally Stripped*, and show the Stones in fighting form, performing fresh takes on beloved tracks and tight as a drum as a performing unit.

The *Stripped* documen

tary, long traded as a bootleg and a favorite amongst hardcore fans, is excellent. The studio footage is especially great to see, with the band recording in the round, working off each other as only a group of musicians who know every quirk their fellow bandmates might have and what every twitch signals. The expanded form of the documentary from its 1995 cut doesn't really do it any favors—one newly added pre-show rehearsal segment is fun at first for its fly-on-the-wall aspect, but drags as Richards hams for the camera and the minutes tick by. But fans who haven't seen it in years will love to have it.

The real attraction, though, are the three full-length shows included. All of them are in halls much smaller than the Stones are used to playing, and that the band clearly benefits from performing in. The London show, at the infamous Brixton Academy, is the least engaging of the bunch, as it's really just the Stones' arena show in a slightly smaller (5,000-seat) venue. And the show at the equally legendary Paris Olympia drags at times, though it's fantastic to see the Stones up close, interacting and performing without the relative safety of the giant production they're accustomed to.

It's the show at Amsterdam's Paradiso, however, that's worth the price of the whole package.



Ron Wood, Keith Richards performing live onstage at Brixton Academy.
Graham Wiltshire/Getty Images

The Stones are on fire throughout, tearing the roof off the 1,500-capacity club like it's 1972 again—or even 1965. In fact, they kick things off with a couple of their earliest hits ("Not Fade Away" and "It's All Over Now," as ramshackle as they were back in the day), before finding their collective footing with the title track of 1969's *Let It Bleed*. The rest of the show is noteworthy for its amazing set list, which highlights some of the best of the Stones' non-singles catalog.

So, while the Stones on *Totally Stripped* is hardly the one you'd catch in concert these days—or certainly the mid-'60s outfit who surely couldn't hold a candle to The Beatles' performances of the same era, whatever Keith Richards claims—it does highlight what's so infuriating about Richards' constant comparisons to the Fabs in that it's not one he needs to make. The Stones in 1995 were probably as good as they ever were live, and there's no reason

Richards shouldn't let them find their place in history based on that, rather than some trumped up, imagined rivalry.