



I (still) wanna be your man – and hardly need try

Rock Will Hodgkinson

The Rolling Stones

O₂, London

★★★★★

A Rolling Stones concert is always an event but it has been decades since there was this level of anticipation for a night with The Greatest Rock'n'Roll Band in the world.

Yes, it marked their 50th anniversary, but it was auspicious for other reasons. The Stones have kept going for so long, surviving everything from drug busts to former wives, that they have passed the wrinkly rocker stage, passed even the national treasure stage, and become an indestructible inevitability.

It makes no sense that Mick Jagger can still dance like a priapic imp at the age of 69, or that Keith Richards can overdose on heroin and fall out of

coconut trees and still be able to blast into that glorious open G riff to *Brown Sugar*, but at the O₂, we were witness to a former R&B covers band from South London becoming the greatest survival story since the cockroach.

A vast Stones lip logo enveloped the stage and a samba school passed through the auditorium, in Stones gorilla masks, before Jagger — wrapped in black and silver and starved to perfection — led the band into *I Wanna Be Your Man*, followed by *Get Off of My Cloud*. It paid homage to the band's roots in the 60s blues scene. It was also sloppy. It's one of the Stones' great charms that, after all these years, they still struggle with keeping time.

"Everybody all right in the cheap seats?" asked Jagger. "Problem is, they're not really cheap." £90 is a lot to see four skinny men play from a distance but hearing *It's All Over Now* made it OK: nobody can infuse simple

rock'n'roll with such spirit as the Stones. As for *Paint It Black*, it was magical. Many of us have these songs so embedded in us that we forget the Stones wrote them; to hear them brought alive — with conviction, not nostalgia — was special indeed.

It seemed to get better with each song. Mary J. Blige admirably filled the impassioned, gospel-soaked vocal part originally provided by Merry Clayton on *Gimme Shelter*, hitting the right chemistry with Jagger. Richards, initially uncomfortable and nervous, loosened up on *Wild Horses*, which seems to capture his ragged but sentimental essence. Jagger danced on the runway for *All Down the Line* as footage of musical legends from Chuck Berry to Tina Turner played out behind him. It was a nod to the debt the Stones owe to all that have come before them, and their own place in the history of rock'n'roll.

Jeff Beck blasted out the heavy rock for *I'm Going Down* before Jagger thanked the crowd for sticking with them all this time. "It's been an amazing journey," he said. "Took us 50 years to get from Dartford to Greenwich." It wasn't so amazing when the band played *Out of Control*, an awful song from the 1983-2011 wilderness years, but *Doom And Gloom*, which is new but also good, proved there is hope for the future.

The older songs brought the band alive. Bill Wyman played on *It's Only Rock'n'Roll*, looking exactly the same as he did when he was in the band: like a council official making an inspection

of noise levels. Richards took the vocals for *Before They Make Me Run* and *Happy*, and his playing was much better than on the last tour, where he seemed frozen. Mick Taylor, a guitarist during the Stones' 69-75 golden age, came out for *Midnight Rambler*, as dark and immoral as it is exciting, with Taylor blasting off on a virtuoso solo that never lost that essential Stones groove. The



"Remember, brown sugar in the cocoa"

encore featured Jagger, suitably satanic in a giant black cloak, leading the band to the front of the runway for an incendiary *Sympathy For the Devil*. It goes against the laws of nature and reason, but this really did feel like a band at the height of its powers, 50 years young and still knocking 'em dead.