



In the weeks leading up to the Rolling Stones' forth visit to New Zealand, moronic writers, feeling suddenly topical, filled their opinion columns with phrases like 'grandfathers of rock', 'rock dinosaurs', and the ever popular, 'tired old rockers'. These alleged 'writers' should have their word processors shoved sideways up their collective assholes, because over two nights at Western Springs, the very last thing the Rolling Stones were was tired.

Auckland central was flooded with people over this long weekend. Two separate Easter carnivals, and a Warriors match at Ericsson Stadium meant the seams of hotels and motels were bursting, but the main event was always going to be happening in a field in Grey Lynn.

Upon the grass at Western Springs, a mammoth stage that resembled the deck of a spaceship had been under construction for the previous four days. The main focal point were two 'scraper high circular speaker stacks, coated in silver panels, at each side of the stage, and a metallic cobra that rose high above the stadium and spat flames. A giant Jumbotron screen in the middle of the stage meant those near the back could see, and four walkways promised those on the periphery close-ups of the band.

By 11am on the day of the first show, queues were already forming for the free-for-all seating, and by early evening the reserved area was filling up.

In support, the Exponents wished everyone a "happy easter", then launched straight into 'Who Loves Who The Most'. Lead singer Jordan Luck bounced and smiled as the band swung through a high energy 'best of' set that included 'Sink Like A Stone', 'Erotic', 'I'll Say Goodbye' and 'Why Does Love Do This To Me?'. Midway through, drummer Harry 'Lambi' and bassist Dave Gent took a breather and 'Victoria' was given the acoustic treatment. This pop pumped for six or so songs, but began to wear thin as my mind anticipated events more majestic.

At 8.15pm, the beams of the stadium lights were dimmed and a calm voice welcomed the crowd "to the Rolling Stones' Voodoo Lounge". A looped, jungle drum rhythm boomed from the speakers, then was enveloped by Charlie Watts pounding out the beat to 'Not Fade Away'. As the lights surged, Jagger, Richards, Wood and new bassist Daryl Jones, appeared on the lip of the stage to be greeted by a thunderous cheer. Immediately everyone's on their feet, the entire stage and stadium appear to rise a foot off the ground, and this level of hyperbole hardly dips for the following two hours.

The Rolling Stones showed they play it like they talk it. Basically, they're a damn good, flat out rock 'n' roll band: two guitarists trading off the vocals of the best frontman in the world, backed up by a rhythm section as solid as concrete.

The recent *Voodoo Lounge* album got a token look-in with 'U Got Me Rocking', 'I Go Wild' and 'Sparks Will Fly', but everyone was definitely here for an oldies show, and that's what went down. 'Tumbling Dice' and 'Shattered' were followed by *Exile On Main Street*'s 'All Down The Line', with Jagger shedding clothes at the intro to each song. By the time Richards bashed the unmistakable opening riff from 'Satisfaction', he was down to a white T-shirt and tight black pants, and strutting like a man possessed. He skips from runway to runway, using every Jagger facial expression, exaggerated hand movement, and spastic dance move, and manages to make it look perfectly choreographed. 'Satisfaction' gets stretched to breaking point, as backing vocalists Bernard Fowler of Tackhead and the very baaaaaad Lisa Fischer stomp it up with Jagger.

A change of direction sees Richards and Wood parked on stools, and the drum riser pushed forward, creating, considering the surroundings, an impossibly intimate setting for 'Angie' and 'Sweet Virginia'.

The disco thump of 'Miss You' meant we were back in the swing of things, and included a screaming solo from veteran Stones saxophonist Chuck Levall. Next up, the fractured start to 'Honky Tonk Woman' sends the capacity crowd into convulsions, while the screen flashes images of PYTs in the front rows.

Jagger departed and left Richards with the run of the stage. He laid down a tortured version of 'Slipping Away'. Hopefully he didn't mind that everyone sat down.

Appearing in a single spotlight, wearing a witchdoctor's black top hat and tails, and round dark sunglasses, Jagger looks like a sinister pied piper as he seemingly caresses the opening lines from 'Sympathy For The Devil'. This coincides with six enormous inflatables, including a voodoo doll, a genie with six arms, and a guitar-strumming Elvis, rising up over the back of the stage. This is the point at which the show turns from phenomenal, to brilliant beyond belief.

Lisa Fischer and Jagger have verbal sex on 'Gimme Shelter', and Ron Wood oozes cool as he leads in on the shuffling 'Street Fighting Man'. The opening chords of 'Start Me Up' are accompanied by individual flashes of flame, that shoot out across the width of the stage, and the entire crowd sings along to 'you make a grown man cry'.

The on-stage relationship between Jagger and Richards is like watching a game of one upmanship. When Jagger encroaches on Keith's area of the stage, he's chased out, so will run over and put his arm around Ron Wood. But it's Jagger who scolds Richards with hard stares when Keith spends too much time out on the ramps.

After a thumping version of 'It's Only Rock 'n' Roll', and a funkier-than-ever 'Brown Sugar', they disappear for the first time. There could only be one encore, and 'Jumpin' Jack Flash' delivers all of its promises.

As those of the old school do, the entire band form a line centre stage and take their bows, Charlie Watts lopes up slowly from behind the drums, receives the biggest cheer, and it's all over now. Same time tomorrow then.

You feel like a Stones veteran coming back for the second night, but the anticipation level is just as high. This is the last gig of the Asian/Pacific leg of the *Voodoo Lounge World Tour*, and the Stones appear determined to, as Al Green says, give it everything. Mostly the set stays the same, but magically they include *Exile*'s 'Rocks Off', 'Beast Of Burden' from *Some Girls*, and a stupefyingly beautiful version of 'Wild Horses'. 'Rock And A Hard Place', the only tune they play from *Steel Wheels*, is sublime, and during Keith's set he pulls a ragged version of 'Happy' from the bag, so as not to have us sit down on him. The run to the finish mirrors the night before, except 'Monkey Man' takes the place of 'Gimme Shelter'. They bow, the sky fills with fireworks and explosions, and that's it.

Despite all the show business and hype that surrounds the Rolling Stones in the 90s, ultimately, most people must have been at these two concerts for the songs. The Stones own one of the finest collections of said songs ever; the fact they played so many of them, makes you hazard a guess they're not planning to come round these parts again. But at least now 80,000 people can say a ridiculously important sentence that's just five words wide: "I saw the Rolling Stones."

JOHN RUSSELL

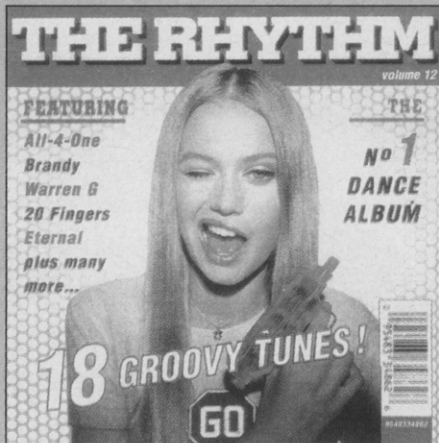
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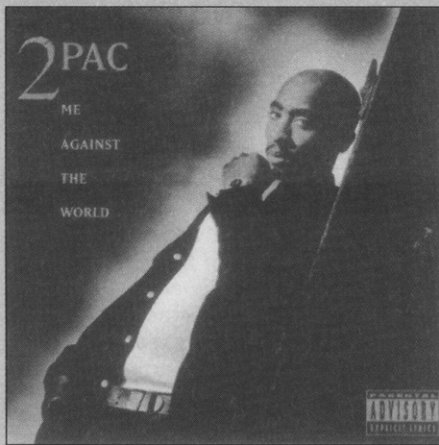
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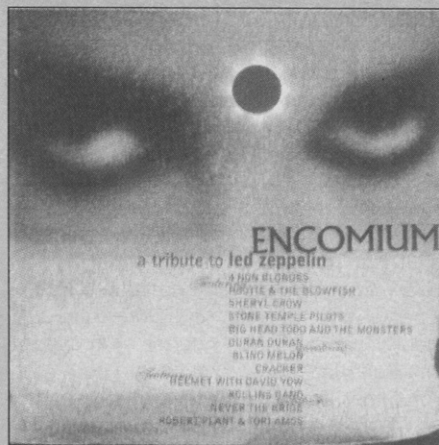
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