



"I think it's about time you shut up and we have Howlin' Wolf onstage," Brian Jones told host Jack Good on *Shindig!* In 1965.

# PAINT IT BLUE

With more outré influences than The Beatles, but not bogged down in blues purism, the Stones were perfectly positioned to start a 60s revolution, writes **STEVE O'BRIEN**

It's a familiar, oft-told story, that first meeting between Mick Jagger and Keith Richards on Platform Two of Dartford Railway Station, on 17 October 1961. But what if a small detail had been different that day? Instead of it being *The Best Of Muddy Waters* and Chuck Berry's *Rockin' At The Hops* Jagger had under his arm, which piqued the interest of the teenage Richards, what if it had been *Listen To Cliff* and *Here We Go Again* by the Kingston Trio?

How different would The Rolling Stones

have sounded? Hey, would we even be listening to them now if that first album had been chock-full of Elvis favourites and Johnnie Ray pastiches?

As it was, the nascent Rolling Stones always wore those blues and early rock'n'roll influences brazenly on their sleeves. Every Stones fan will remember that cherishable clip of Brian and Mick on the TV show *Shindig!*, alongside the great Howlin' Wolf, Jones so palpably excited he tells the show's host to shut up, so impatient is he for their hero to take the mic. It's an amazing piece of

TV, this grizzled blues veteran, 54 at the time, performing *How Many More Years*, with a gaggle of kids – and awestruck Stones – at his feet, and millions of people watching at home.

It's likely that most people who had tuned in on 20 May 1965 had never heard of Howlin' Wolf, even though they'd have known one of his numbers, *Little Red Rooster*, after it had been covered by the Stones the year before. But then, the London five-piece had long been on a mission to spread the gospel of the blues. "If we could



turn them on to Muddy Waters, Jimmy Reed, Howlin' Wolf and John Lee Hooker," Keith Richards said, "our job was done."

Though it's Mick and Keith's first meeting, and their bonding over Chuck Berry and Muddy Waters that's so often talked about as the Stones' "big bang" moment, actually it was that deep love of the blues that brought the whole band together. You only need look at the tracklisting on their debut album, from 1964, to see what they were all listening to in the first half of the 60s. Unlike The Beatles, whose covers were mostly of chart hits by already established artists, the Stones dug deeper, with cuts from more obscure performers such as Willie Dixon, James Moore, Ted Jarrett and Rufus Thomas.

It wasn't just the blues. Rock'n'roll also played its part in the shaping of the Stones' musical identity. Bill Wyman and Keith Richards would often talk about their worlds being opened up after seeing – at different screenings – the movie *Rock, Rock, Rock!*, with its line-up including Chuck Berry, LaVern Baker, Teddy Randazzo and The Teenagers. Mick, meanwhile, had been captivated by Little Richard's fantastically unhinged performance of Long Tall Sally in the 1956 Bill Haley flick *Don't Knock The Rock*. Then there was the King, of whom Keith said: "I knew from the minute I heard Elvis that that's what I wanted to do."

Within the Stones' story, however, there are significant figures that proved pivotal in expanding its members' cultural horizons. One was Dave Godin, someone who was, as Keith explained in the book *According To The Rolling Stones*, "a real collector, a great aficionado". After becoming friendly with Mick after their chance meeting on Platform Two, the two of them would visit Godin's house in Bexleyheath. "There were all these records," Richards remembered. "We just went, 'Jesus Christ!' It was a treasure trove."

Another who was instrumental in opening the Stones up to the marvels of 12-bar blues was Alexis Korner. A purist by nature and a decade and a half older than the Stones, the bluesman was, as Charlie Watts said, someone "who knew everything about music". Watts was already playing alongside Brian Jones in Alexis Korner's Blues Incorporated when, in early 1962, Mick and Keith visited the Ealing Jazz Club for a jamming session.

The club was a Mecca for R&B buffs, a place where "rhythm and blues freaks could conglomerate", as Keith Richards explained in his autobiography, *Life*. "It was where the whole blues network could go," he wrote. "It's where we all met to swap ideas and swap records and hang. Rhythm and blues was a very important distinction in the 60s. Either you were blues and jazz, or you were

rock'n'roll, but rock'n'roll had died and gone pop."

## CHANGING TIDES

All you have to do is take a look at the UK Top 10 from March '62 to see how barren the music landscape was at the time. The Shadows' *Wonderland* was at No 1, but elsewhere in that rundown were 45s from such milk-and-water artists as Kenny Ball And His Jazzmen, Karl Denver, Acker Bilk and Helen Shapiro. The raucous spirit of All Shook Up, Whole Lot Of Shakin' Going On and School Days seemed in the dim and distant in 1962.

No wonder, then, that the Stones retreated to the world of the blues and R&B. Hell, even their name derived from the music they were becoming ever more devoted fans of (Rollin' Stone was a 1950 number recorded by Muddy Waters). But it's important to note that the Stones were never blues purists. Keith would recall many of that crowd – Korner among them – being sniffy about some of the songs the band

**"Mick and Keith's meeting is often talked about as the 'big bang', but a deep love of the blues brought the whole band together"**

covered in those days. "Roll Over Beethoven," he noted in *According To The Rolling Stones*, recalling one time when Korner joined the group on stage, "was definitely not up Alexis' strasse". He added: "I saw [him] deliberately break a string so he didn't have to play."

"Some of the musicians really resisted," Richards went on. "You'd get taken round the back and shown a razor and they'd say, 'Take this fucking rock'n'roll shit out of here, my son!'"

While those early rock'n'roll platters were still precious go-tos for the boys, it was increasingly blues and R&B that were pushing them in fresh musical directions. Jagger has always said he learned to play harmonica through listening to Jimmy Reed records, while Charlie Watts credited the music that Korner introduced him to as helping him become an R&B drummer, as opposed to the jazz sticksman he'd been before joining the Stones.

That musical eclecticism was reflected in the songs the embryonic Stones were playing live. Take their 12 July 1962 gig at London's Marquee Club: though blues saturates the set, with covers including Robert Johnson's



The Stones returned to blues covers with 2016's *Blue And Lonesome*. "Jagger has rarely sounded so animated," wrote *Record Collector*.

I Believe I'll Dust My Broom and Little Willie Littlefield's Kansas City, there's also a Paul Anka song in there (Tell Me That You Love Me), something Alexis Korner would never have approved of.

Although the band were, by then, blues devotees, they were never stick-in-the-mud loyalists like the Ealing Jazz Club hardcore. As Jagger admitted to *Rolling Stone* magazine in 2016: "You were kind of forced into a purist style because you wouldn't get booked if you were a rock band. So we made out we were blues purists to get booked. The reality is, in rehearsal we would play anything – Ritchie Valens and Buddy Holly."

The Stones would cover Buddy Holly for their third single, Not Fade Away, despite Charlie Watts' lack of enthusiasm for the Lubbock-born singer ("I thought Buddy Holly was a great joke," he once said). But that Holly cover is an outlier in their discography. Their first-ever 45 was Come On, a version of a Chuck Berry B-side from 1961 (its A-side, Go, Go, Go, had just managed to scrape into the UK Top 40). After this, most of their releases would be covers of songs by Black artists, from a

variety of different genres. (They'd plunder Chuck's discography again on their debut album, this time his 1958 single Carol.)

## BLUE AND AWESOME

The Beatles were essaying songs by artists such as Smokey Robinson, The Isley Brothers and Burt Bacharach, and certainly John Lennon and Paul McCartney weren't dropping names like Muddy Waters and Billy Boy Arnold in the press, as the Stones were. The band weren't just talking these names up to peacock their outré music tastes; it was a genuine desire to champion artists that they felt were under-appreciated not just in the UK, but in the US too.

"We didn't think we were ever going to do anything much except turn other people on to Muddy Waters and Bo Diddley and Jimmy Reed," Keith wrote in *Life*. "We had no intention of being anything ourselves... We were unpaid promoters of Chicago blues." The band took this job seriously. Keith goes on to talk about how researching the blues involved "intense study". "You were supposed to spend all your waking hours studying Jimmy Reed, Muddy

Waters, Little Walter, Howlin' Wolf, Robert Johnson," he explained. "That was your gig."

And it worked. The Stones were bloody-minded about putting out Little Red Rooster as a single in November 1964, against the advice of their label, Decca. Written by Willie Dixon, it had first been waxed by Howlin' Wolf in 1961, but the Stones' doggedly faithful cover would take it to No 1 in the UK. "The floodgates burst after that," Keith recalled. "Suddenly, Muddy and Howlin' Wolf and Buddy Guy are getting gigs and working. I'm absolutely sure what we were doing made Berry Gordy at Motown capable of pushing his stuff elsewhere, and it certainly rejuvenated Chicago blues as well."

There were more covers on second LP *The Rolling Stones No. 2* (including numbers by Solomon Burke and Dale Hawkins) and 1965's *Out Of Our Heads* (this time leaning more into soul, with songs by Sam Cooke and Marvin Gaye, among others). But by fourth album *Aftermath*, Jagger and Richards had become proficient enough as songwriters to dispense with covers altogether.

## RAILWAY CUTTINGS

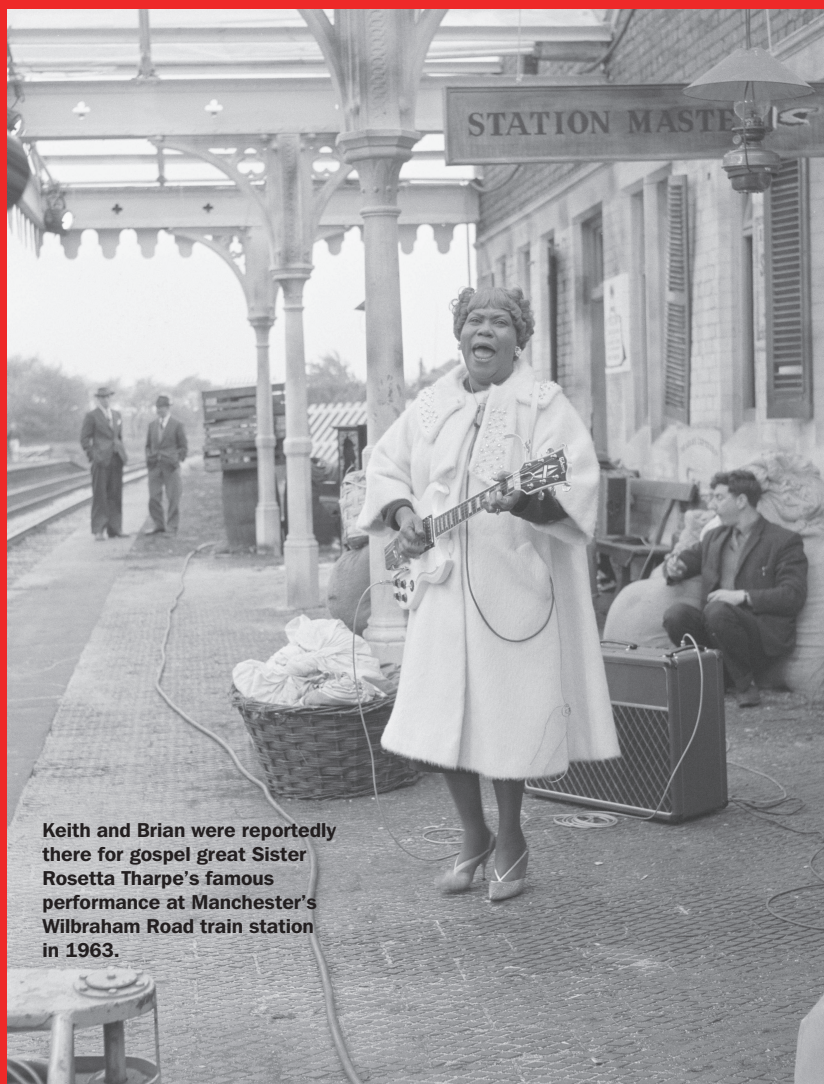
Railway platforms figure prominently in the life of Keith Richards. Not only was it on a train platform that he met future bandmate Mick Jagger, but it was on another – specifically Manchester's Wilbraham Road station – that, along with Brian Jones, he witnessed some of his favourite artists performing live.

In 1963, a group of Black artists from America toured Europe as part of the Blues And Gospel Tour, which proved so popular that they returned for a second run, in 1964. For blues fans, the line-up seemed Heaven-sent – Muddy Waters, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Sonny Terry, Brownie McGhee, Cousin Joe, Otis Spann, Reverend Gary Davis...

Granada TV wanted to showcase these artists and invited them to Manchester's Wilbraham Road train station for the recording of what would be titled *The Blues And Gospel Train*.

And among the crowd watching these legendary artists that day were some of rock and pop's soon-to-be biggest names, including not just Keith and Brian, but Eric Clapton and Jeff Beck, all of whom travelled up in a minibus from London.

"Manchester was the hottest blues and jazz scene in the country and we already had a very big R&B appreciation scene," the University Of Salford's Dr Chris Lee told the BBC in 2014. "The Twisted Wheel [nightclub] had been operating since 1961, playing more or less all urban Black music and concerts at the Free Trade Hall were always sold out. In fact, Manchester was the only place that took the first tour in 1963."



Keith and Brian were reportedly there for gospel great Sister Rosetta Tharpe's famous performance at Manchester's Wilbraham Road train station in 1963.



Purists may not have stayed with the Stones over the decades after they began to pen their own material, but blues and R&B have remained a vital part of the band's DNA since *Aftermath*. And those early influences are still held dear, a fact they demonstrated on their 23rd album, 2016's *Blue And Lonesome*.

Composed entirely of covers, it took the Stones back to their roots, paying heartfelt tribute to artists such as Howlin' Wolf (Commit A Crime), Buddy Johnson (Just

**"You were kind of forced into a blues purist style because you wouldn't get booked if you were a rock band"**  
**– Mick Jagger**

Your Fool), Willie Dixon (I Can't Quit You Baby) and Little Walter (I Gotta Go). In fact, the only glaring omission was Richards' beloved Muddy Waters. Speaking to *The New York Times* in 2016, Charlie Watts said of the record, "This album is what I've always wanted the Stones to do. It's what we do best and what we did when we first got together."

That LP earned the Stones some of their best reviews in decades, while also winning them a Grammy for Best Traditional Blues Album. "This labour of love," raved *The Observer*, "finds the Stones and their associates having a high old time, playing tunes they know inside out." *Record Collector*, meanwhile, said at the time of its release that "Jagger has rarely sounded so

Though Keith Richards has always talked of Chuck Berry as a hero, and indeed initially bonded with Mick after spotting a copy of the American singer's 1960 album, *Rockin' At The Hops*, under Jagger's arm, relations between the two artists weren't always smooth. In fact, Richards' one-time hero once smacked him so hard that Keith walked away with a black eye.

"We saw him play in New York somewhere," Richards told *Rolling Stone*, "and afterward I was backstage in his dressing room, where his guitar was lying in its case. I wanted to look, out of professional interest, and as I'm just plucking the strings, Chuck walked in and gave me this wallop to the frickin' left eye. But I realised I was in the wrong. If I walked into my dressing room and saw somebody fiddling with my axe, it would be perfectly all right to sock 'em, you know? I just got caught." Richards would describe Berry as "prickly" in person, but that – and the black eye – didn't stop Keith from

inducting Berry into the Rock And Roll Hall Of Fame in 1986. Later, in 2014, he paid tribute to Berry at the Polar Music Prize in Sweden: "He leapt out of the radio at me... He was the air I breathed for many years when I was learning guitar and trying to figure out how you could be such an all-rounder. Such a great voice, such a great player and also such a great showman... it was all in one package."



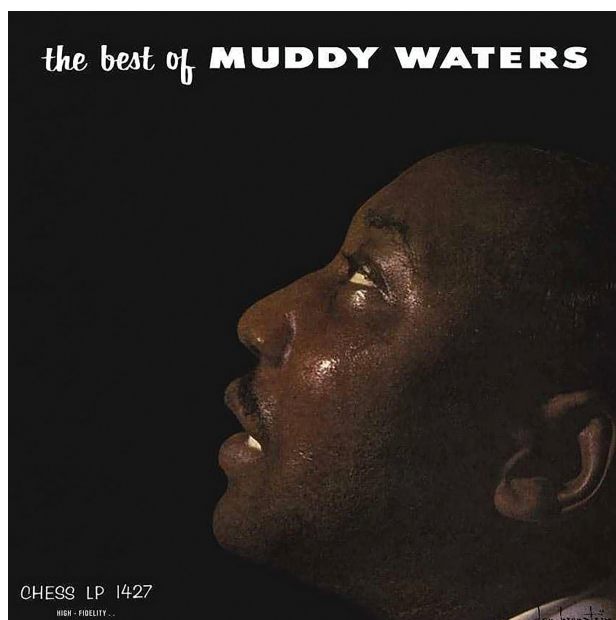
Mick and Keith bonded over Chuck Berry's *Rockin' At The Hops*, but the latter got more than he bargained for when he met his hero.

animated or unaffectedly impassioned; moaning, testifying and pumping blood into the tracks between unleashing his legendary harmonica skills".

As sublime as *Beggars Banquet* or *Their Satanic Majesties Request* remain, we should still treasure those first albums, where Mick, Keith and co were on a mission to alert the world to the brilliance of a genre generally unknown outside America. Because long-players such as *The Rolling Stones No. 2* and *Out Of Our Heads* are as authentically Stones as any of the Jagger-Richards-composed records that came after,

showcasing the songs that made all its members fall in love with music in the first place. And as Mick explained to *The Sun* in 2016, the blues and R&B are genres that still has relevance and power today.

"It was very raunchy compared to most pop music," he said, recalling how he lost his heart to the sounds of the American south. "It spoke to direct experience and the sounds were more vibrant, the rhythms more interesting and more danceable. It had an instant appeal. For my generation, it was the equivalent of suburban white kids doing rap."



*The Best Of Muddy Waters*: one of the albums Mick famously had under his arm during his fateful encounter with Keith. Right: Bill Haley And His Comets, Little Richard and more starred in 1956's *Don't Knock The Rock*. Mick was captivated by Richard's performance of Long Tall Sally in the film.