

ICON OF THE MONTH

In mediaspeak, the Rolling Stones are a living legend. As 70,000 people spilled out of Wembley Stadium last month, after what may be their last big gig in Britain, I heard a man say to his little boy, 'I'm glad that you've seen them, because when you're older...'

But what had he seen? A monument to music? A cultural joke? Four middle-aged men pretending they were Jumpin' Jack Flash?

The original Stones have become exemplars of a range of rock'n'roll lifestyles. In 1969, Brian Jones pipped Jimi Hendrix and Jim Morrison by dying in mysterious circumstances. Keith Richards has varied the theme by surviving in mysterious circumstances, despite a lifetime of chemical abuse that to many people has been almost heroic in its self-abandon.

Bill Wyman opted instead for sexual achievement, keeping a score of the women he laid which reputedly ran into four figures, and topping it off by marrying a girl of sweet 16.

Charlie Watts has been true to a less familiar type, the brilliant journeyman who plays his part to perfection before going home to his wife of 34 years and his beloved big-band jazz.

Which leaves Mick Jagger, the real Peter Pan of pop. The Little Red Rooster may no longer be cock of the walk, but he still can strut and crow. His arrested development is pointed up by the contrast with Bianca, his queen consort of the Sixties, who has grown up to be a human-rights campaigner of international repute.

The men who once, in an ill-advised excursion into Pepperdom, took the title 'Their Satanic Majesties' still have about them the feel of royalty. Perhaps their name has a faint echo of another kind of Roller: a sumptuous machine, eccentric, yes, and dedicated to excess in a peculiarly British way, but one that



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does not let you down. 'Start me up, and don't you know I'll never stop, never stop, never stop...'

The Stones may be outmoded, but they have never been outclassed. You'll find no vomit on the upholstery. And, despite their vintage (or because of it, perhaps), they are still going. Which

brings us back to how they get away with it.

Perhaps what sets the Stones apart from their erstwhile rivals and peers is that their image had no sell-by date. It may have been astute marketing that positioned them against The Beatles as ugly and dangerous, but their genuine devotion to the dark side of the blues identified them with values that had nothing to do with youth and its hope to fall in love or change the world.

That is why they can still perform the songs of their prime without the aid of irony. The spirit that informed them – cynical, heartless, shallow, rude and vain – was always old before its time.

And time is on their side. ('I Can't Get No) Satisfaction' has proved to be a more convincing anthem for the Sixties than 'All You Need is Love' – and for every decade since. At the end of the century, the vague but potent apocalypticism of 'Gimmie Shelter' strikes a deeper chord than 'Let It Be'.

And the self-proclaimed Greatest Rock'n'Roll Band in the World have stayed remarkably true to that spirit. Thirty-seven years on, long after the Beach Boys have grown old and the Kinks have gone straight, after Pink Floyd have turned grey and Michael Jackson white, the Rolling Stones still haven't gathered any moss.

Their only religion and their only cause have been a little sympathy for the devil and a lot of self-indulgence. It's only rock'n'roll, but they have kept the faith – and in our world integrity of any kind wins respect. **Huw Spanner**