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The Rolling Stones

Blue and Lonesome

by [George de Stefano](#)
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On their new album, the Stones return to their origins -- but now with greater authority and skill



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Lenny Kravitz, in a January 2016 *Rolling Stone* interview, went full fanboy over his heroes—and role models—the Rolling Stones.

“I saw the Stones on the last tour, the last show of the American leg,” he reported. “They were as hardcore as I’ve ever seen them — their aggression and precision were unbelievable. I look at them and say, ‘That’s what I want to be doing when I’m in my seventies.’”

And that was before the septuagenarians surprised the world with *Blue and Lonesome*, an album of cover versions of 12 blues songs recorded mostly in the mid- to late-'50s by legendary figures (Howlin' Wolf, Little Walter, Jimmy Reed, Magic Sam) and lesser-known talents (Eddie Taylor, Little Johnny Taylor, Lightnin' Slim). The album, cut over three days in December 2015 at British Grove Studios, has earned the Stones their best reviews in decades. Aggression? Check. Precision? Absolutely. Also, deep grooves, raw emotion, and the unfakeable sound of a band playing live (no overdubs), the musicians fully in sync with each other and the material.

The Stones' first studio album since 2005's *A Bigger Bang* (an inconsistent but underrated release) evidently was a happy accident. New Jagger-Richards compositions weren't quite gelling in the studio, so the band, according to producer Don Was, decided to "cleanse the palate" by jamming on some blues, in particular, the Little Walter number that became the title track. After the band — Jagger, Richards, Watts, Wood, bassist Darryl Jones and keyboardists Chuck Leavell and Matt Clifford — had five tracks in the can, Was urged Jagger to dig into his blues library and pick some more songs to keep the momentum going. Sir Mick, to his credit, didn't go for anything obvious or overfamiliar. That means no "Hoochie Koochie Man" or "Smokestack Lightnin'"; instead, deep-catalog gems like Jimmy Reed's "Little Rain", Eddie Taylor's "Hate to See You Go", Little Johnny Taylor's "Everybody Knows About my Good Thing".

Howlin' Wolf, one of the band's earliest inspirations, is honored with spirited renditions of "Commit a Crime" and "Just Like I Treat You". Jagger sounds downright feral on the former, ardent on the latter, and on both, Richards (or is it Wood?) expertly channels the late Hubert Sumlin, Wolf's longtime lead guitarist. Fifty-one years ago, the Stones literally sat at Wolf's feet as the blues titan roared "How Many More Years?" during a broadcast of the TV show *Shindig*. (On that same episode, the band introduced their latest single, a riff-driven little ditty called "Satisfaction".) They had by then cut versions of his "Little Red Rooster" and "Down in the Bottom" that showed them to be apt pupils but not yet masters. Their covers had sex and energy, but they could also come off a bit callow. Now, older than Wolf was when he made his classic Chess recordings, the Stones bring emotional maturity and flawless musicianship to their interpretations.

Blue and Lonesome features four Little Walter compositions — "Hate to See You Go", "I Gotta Go", "Just Your Fool", and, best of all, the intense, even anguished title track. Jagger plays harmonica on all of them, and if he's not the blues harp virtuoso Walter Jacobs was (and who is?), he's nonetheless terrific, turning in well-conceived and concise solos that evoke but don't slavishly imitate the originals.

But it's Jagger's vocals that are the album's main attraction, and its biggest surprise. Can it be that at 73 he's singing better than ever, with greater depth of feeling and technical mastery than at any time in his six decades as the world's best-known lead singer? Believe it. He never sounds mannered, or camp, or like the ironist of so many Stones originals, from "19th Nervous Breakdown" to "Satisfaction" to "Street Fighting Man". The *Blue and Lonesome* songs demand unaffected, emotionally forthright singing, and Jagger delivers. The blues, contrary to common misperception, aren't just about pain, but also about coping with it, as well as love, sex, and all manner of quotidian experience, good and bad. Jagger well knows this, and he masterfully conveys a range of moods—broken-hearted, pensive, obsessive, and, of course, lascivious. But funny, too, as on the jealous lover's complaint, "Everybody Knows About My Good Thing" ("Call the plumber darlin'/there must be a leak in my drain").

Blue and Lonesome, however, is not a Mick Jagger solo album. Keith Richards and Ron Wood consistently dazzle while avoiding the bane of much contemporary blues — prolix solos. Even Eric Clapton, guesting on "Everybody Knows About My Good Thing" and "I Can't Quit You, Baby",

doesn't overindulge. The other musicians have thoroughly absorbed the signature styles of the illustrious Chess sidemen; Charlie Watts, excellent throughout, seems to have been possessed by the spirit of Fred Below, who drummed on hits by Little Walter, Muddy Waters, and Howlin' Wolf. Leavell and Clifford are fluent in the languages of pianists Sunnyland Slim and Otis Spann; Darryl Jones, the band's bassist (although not an official Stone) since Bill Wyman's departure twenty-odd years ago, gets the deep-toned, settle-into-the-groove sound of the great Willie Dixon.

Back in 1964, the five original Rolling Stones made a pilgrimage to Chess Records, an event immortalized in countless books, articles, and in the 2008 film *Cadillac Records*. There they met several of their idols, including Muddy Waters and recorded tracks that appeared on their *12x5* album, including an instrumental whose title, "2120 S. Michigan Avenue", was the address of the company's Chicago studios. On *Blue and Lonesome*, the Stones return to their origins, now with far greater authority and skill. The album might be a one-off or a warm-up for a (hopefully) strong album of new material. Regardless, it's a peak moment in the storied career of rock's most enduring band.

Blue and Lonesome

Rating: 8