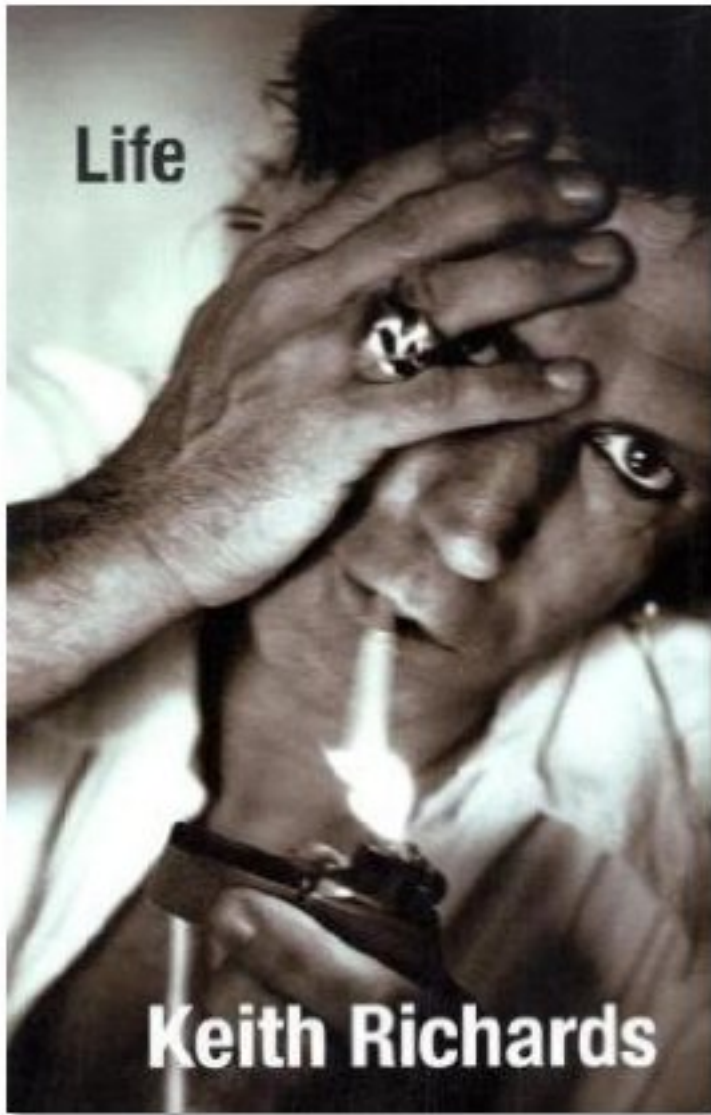


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by Keith Richards with James Fox

Reviewed by George De Stefano | Released: October 26, 2010

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The inside cover flap of *Life*, the much-anticipated memoir by Keith Richards, carries a note, in Richards' handwriting: "This is the Life. Believe it or not, I haven't forgotten any of it."

Given Richards' storied history of illicit substance use, and his avid consumption of prescription pharmaceuticals, a reader might justifiably scoff. How could he

remember what he had for breakfast this morning, let alone events of 40-odd years ago?

Skepticism, however, evaporates quickly with immersion in the book, a vivid, detailed, and entertaining account of the Rolling Stones guitarist and co-leader's singular life. Richards—assisted by James Fox, a journalist and longtime friend who shaped and edited the book—does seem to have remembered everything, or at least everything that anyone remotely interested in the endearing old reprobate would want to know.

It's all there—the sex, the drugs, the rock 'n' roll, chronicled with candor, insight, and (mostly) good humor. *Life* is a capacious—albeit somewhat overlong—book, and the reviews to date have zeroed in on particular aspects: Richards' gallantry toward women, hailed by the *New York Times*' Michiko Kakutani and Maureen Dowd, and his harsh, though often on-target comments about Mick Jagger.

For this reviewer, the music is the main attraction of this *Life*. Richards is at his best when talking about it, whether he's recalling the thrill he felt on first hearing American blues and rock and roll and, years later, meeting his musical heroes, or describing his guitar technique and recording studio experiments. Discussing some technical aspects of guitar playing, Richards says, "Readers who wish to can skip Keef's Guitar Workshop." But why would anyone want to? Those sections are much more interesting, and illuminating, than his adventures with substances, which brought him to the attention of the authorities on several continents, or the oft-told tale of mayhem and murder at Altamont, or his love affairs and family life.

Keith Richards was born in 1943 in the London suburb of Dartford, as World War II still raged. His earliest memories include air raid sirens and huddling with his mother in shelters as Hitler's bombs fell. The chapters of *Life* recounting Richards' boyhood are some of the book's best. His evocation of his hometown's shady side reads like an English version of Martin Scorsese's stories about his upbringing in New York's Little Italy. "Everyone from Dartford is a thief," he says. "Dartford has developed an incredible criminal network—you could ask some members of my extended family . . . There's always something fallen off the back of a lorry."

Besides petty crime, there also was radical politics in the Richards family. Keith's grandparents, Ernest and Eliza Richards, were founders of the Walthamstow branch of the Labor Party and Eliza "more or less invented child welfare for Walthamstow, a real reformer." Keith's relatives, from his "red-blooded socialist" grandparents on, didn't have much use for religion. "There's nobody in my family that had anything to do with organized religion. None of them."

Keith early on developed a deep loathing for oppressive authority and bullying. A small kid with big, jutting ears, he endured frequent beatings by bigger and older boys. But he had to fight his battles at home, too. His mother Doris could be cruel. She had his pet mouse and his cat "knocked off." "She killed all my pets when I was a

kid," he says. Outraged by Doris' killing of the cat, Keith put "a note on her bedroom door, with a drawing of a cat that said 'Murderer.' I never forgave her for that." Doris' response: "Shut up. Don't be so soft. It was pissing all over the place."

Growing up in Dartford wasn't all thievery, beatings, and pet murders. Keith's maternal grandfather, Theodore Augustus "Gus" Dupree, an "all-around musician," gave him his first guitar and taught him his "first licks and chords." Richards' gratitude has outlived the long-gone Gus. "I write him notes frequently and pin them up. 'Thanks, Granddad.'" Grandpa Gus influenced the young Keith in another way: he was a bohemian "who encouraged a kind of irreverence and nonconformity."

It was in Dartford that Richards met another musically inclined youth, one Michael Philip Jagger. Keith and Mick were neighbors as children, but Mick's family moved to a better part of town, while the Richards family stayed "across the tracks." The two didn't really connect until they were teenagers, in 1961, at the Dartford train station. The encounter has become the stuff of legend: two music-mad kids, one eager and rough-edged, the other a nascent hipster studying at the London School of Economics (the big-lipped guy) meet and bond immediately over their shared love of Chuck Berry and Muddy Waters.

Jagger, in fact, was carrying albums by both artists when they ran into each other, which enormously impressed Richards. "Did we hit it off?" Keith writes. "You get in a [train] carriage with a guy that's got *Rockin' at the Hops* by Chuck Berry on Chess Records, and *The Best of Muddy Waters* also under his arm, you are gonna hit it off. He's got Henry Morgan's treasure."

One could say it was love at first sight—for Mick and his music—as confirmed by a letter Keith wrote to his Aunt Pat about their meeting. "Anyways the guy on the station, he is called Mick Jagger." Mick, he wrote, "is the greatest R&B singer this side of the Atlantic and I don't mean maybe."

Soon the two were jamming together, trying to copy the American records they loved. "Mick and I must have spent a year, while the Stones were coming together and before, record hunting. There were others like us, trawling far and wide, and meeting one another in record shops." English blues fans back then "were a sight to behold." "They met in little gatherings like early Christians, but in the front rooms in southeast London."

Even as a young, unformed musician, Richards had excellent taste and an acutely tuned bullshit detector. Captivated by the blues, he saw through the pretensions of some of his fellow aficionados, the so-called purists. In the early 60s, black American bluesmen whose music was considered passé in the States could find adoring audiences in Great Britain. But the adoration was conditional, as Richards discovered. He recounts a Muddy Waters concert in which the great, Mississippi Delta-born singer and guitarist opened with an acoustic set but after a break,

returned with his electric band. The fans “virtually booed him off the stage,” Richards recalls.

“That’s when I realized that people were not really listening to the music, they just wanted to be part of this wised-up enclave.”

That savvy observation points to what is most admirable about Richards—his artistic integrity and commitment. He always really listened to the music that moved him, to figure out what made it work, to learn its secrets, and to craft his own signature sound from what he learned from recordings. (“I learned everything I know off of records,” he says.) The blues and rhythm and blues, of course, but also black rock ‘n roll (Berry, Bo Diddley) and, perhaps surprisingly for those who think the Stones’ influences were only African American, Elvis Presley. The first album Richards bought was, in fact, one of Elvis’ that included “the crème de la crème of his Sun [Records] stuff.”

By late 1962, the Rolling Stones line-up had cohered: Jagger, Richards, guitarist and harmonica player Brian Jones, bassist Bill Wyman, and on drums, Charlie Watts. (The early Stones also included boogie-woogie pianist Ian Stewart. But the band’s flamboyant young manager, Andrew Loog Oldham, demoted him to sideman and the band’s driver.) Jones was crucial to the band in its first years, having mastered the instrumental styles of two leading bluesmen, Elmore James’ slide guitar and what Richards calls “the high and lonesome” sound of Jimmy Reed’s harmonica. Jones, who considered himself the band’s leader, also got the Stones some of their first bookings.

But by 1966, the emotionally fragile Jones was already burning out. Displaced from what he considered his rightful position as the Stones’ leader by Jagger and Richards, he became increasingly volatile and nonfunctional. “What probably really stuck in Brian’s craw was when Mick and I started writing the songs,” Richards observes. “Having to come to the studio and learn to play a song Mick and I had written would bring him down.” Richards says that after 1966 Jones hardly played guitar at all on the Stones’ recordings, preferring instead to add sitar or marimba parts to the songs. This did not sit well with Richards.

“Our whole thing was two guitars and everything else wove around that,” he notes. “And when the other guitar ain’t there half the time or has lost interest in it, you start getting overdubbing. A lot of those records is me four times.”

But Jones’ disengagement from the Stones began even earlier. On an early U.S. tour, he dropped out of several gigs, claiming illness. The other Stones discovered that their supposedly ill bandmate was “zooming around Chicago, hanging at a party with so-and-so.” An irreparable rift opened between Richards and Jones: “That’s when I had it in for Brian.” Their “love-hate relationship” was further complicated by Richards’ wooing of Jones’ girlfriend, Swedish model and actress Anita

Pallenberg. Jones, a heavy drug user, became more and more unstable, leading to his dismissal from the band in early 1969 and his death by drowning soon after.

By the end of the sixties, the Rolling Stones reigned as the “greatest rock ‘n’ roll band in the world,” an honorific they’d fully earned with a series of brilliant singles and superb albums like *Beggars Banquet* and *Let it Bleed*. Richards made an artistic breakthrough at this time that would profoundly affect the Stones’ sound: his discovery of open five-string tuning. “It transformed my life,” he says. “I had hit a kind of buffer. I just really thought I was not getting anywhere from straight concert tuning.” Adopting this technique “really reinvigorated me,” he says. He used it to write some of the Stones best-known and greatest songs: “Honky Tonk Women,” “Jumping Jack Flash,” “Brown Sugar,” “Start Me Up” and other classics.

Richards has a knack for explaining instrumental technique in accessible, non-technical language. He really becomes lyrical, though, on the subject of songwriting: “What is it that makes you want to write songs? In a way you want to stretch yourself into other people’s hearts. You want to plant yourself there, or at least get a resonance, where other people become a bigger instrument than the one you’re playing. It becomes almost an obsession to touch other people. To write a song that is remembered and taken to heart is a connection, a touching of bases. A thread that runs through all of us.”

The Stones’ reputation as the world’s greatest rock band notwithstanding, a lot of what the band recorded during late 60s-early 70s wasn’t rock ‘n’ roll at all. Richards notes that *Beggars Banquet*, the Stones’ return to form after what he calls the “flimflam” of 1967’s *Their Satanic Majesties Request*, consisted mostly of “folk songs”—blues and country music. “It was not the interesting thing about the Stones, just sheer rock and roll,” he observes. “A lot of rock and roll on stage, but it was not something we particularly recorded a lot of . . .”

The Stones produced their best work between 1968 and 1972. Their albums became patchy after 1972’s *Exile on Main Street*, whose recording Richards discusses in considerable detail. He devotes much less space to their later work, and with good reason. Who remembers, much less plays, such 1980s releases as *Undercover* and *Dirty Work*?

Steel Wheels, the album they made in 1989, after Jagger and Richards resolved their nasty feud and reunited the band, contains not one song that compares favorably to their best work. The same goes for *Voodoo Lounge*, from 1994. Richards works up some enthusiasm for 1997’s *Bridges to Babylon*, but only for one track, “How Can I Stop?” which features the great jazz saxophonist Wayne Shorter. He has even less to say about their most recent album, 2005’s *A Bigger Bang*.

Since the late 80s, Rolling Stones albums basically have been promotional items for the band’s increasingly elaborate—and extremely lucrative—concert tours. And although the current incarnation of the Stones can still pull off lively performances,

their shows now, with the massive stage sets, video projections, and slick back-up singers, have a Vegas-y showbiz aura about them.

If Richards' usual, unsparing candor is little in evidence when he talks about the Stones' late work, that's not his only blind spot. He calls Bill Wyman an "incredible" bass player but doesn't acknowledge Wyman's bitter complaints that Richards sometimes replaced bass parts Wyman had recorded with his own, which Wyman regarded as inferior.

Richards also goes on at some length about the X-Pensive Winos, the band he formed during the Stones' 1980s hiatus, when relations between him and Jagger were at their most venomous. Keith made two albums with the Winos and toured with them. They may have put on some great shows, as he claims. The records, however, were unexceptional, lacking memorable songwriting, and Richards' singing wasn't strong enough to carry entire albums.

But he's at his most tendentious, and even off-putting, when it comes to his creative partner of nearly 50 years. Some of his criticisms of Mick Jagger—his social climbing, snobbery, and artistic missteps—are all too credible. Richards' campy nicknames for Jagger—"Her Majesty," "Brenda"—are amusing.

But Richards never gives Jagger the credit he deserves for keeping the band going while Richards was in the depths of his heroin addiction. And what to make of his disparaging remarks about Jagger's purportedly small penis: his "tiny todger," as Richards calls it. Richards had already made similar comments to the media before he wrote *Life*, and one can't help wondering what psychosexual business motivates them.

Unacknowledged sexual tension between the two, perhaps? Marianne Faithfull, Jagger's lover during the mid to late 60s, wrote in her memoir *Broken English* that on one occasion, when the two were in bed, Mick confessed to her that he'd love to give Keith oral sex.

Not that Keith would have been up for it. He refers to gay men as "poofters" and complains that the 70s discotheque Studio 54 was full of "faggots in boxer shorts waving champagne bottles." He writes this even though he has had close friendships and working relationships with gay men, such as the London art dealer Robert Fraser and keyboard player and Stones sideman Billy Preston.

Richards makes much of his respect for women, which he contrasts to Jagger's predatory behavior. But he repeatedly calls them "bitches," which Michiko Kakutani and Maureen Dowd strangely overlooked in their praise for *Life*.

Just one week after his book's release, Keith Richards told the British paper *The Guardian* that he and the rest of the Stones would roll once again, on a 2011 world tour. He promised a new album, too—one that would include some of the

“unfinished” material that didn’t make it onto *A Bigger Bang*. Yet another tour, no doubt with \$400 tickets, and a new record comprising outtakes from a previous, weak one? The only reasonable reaction to this news is dismay.

Unless Mick Jagger decides to write his memoir, *Life* really should be the final chapter in the story of the scrappy little rhythm and blues combo from London that conquered the world.

Reviewer George de Stefano grew up with The Rolling Stones, has seen them on tours from 1969 to 2006, and owns pretty much all their albums—even the duds. He is the author of *An Offer We Can't Refuse: The Mafia in the Mind of America* (Faber & Faber/Farrar, Straus, Giroux) and a contributor to the online publications PopMatters, Rootsworld, and I-Italy.