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My Secret Life With the Rolling Stones

By JOYCE MAYNARD

Some thoughts prompted by the Rolling Stones' current concert tour which brings them to Madison Square Garden tonight:

My mother has kept the record albums of her youth in the attic. Frank Sinatra in close-up, wearing a hat, seems to be looking, with blue eyes not yet labeled "old," right into my own. I wouldn't recognize him as the same Frank Sinatra who not so long ago played golf with Spiro Agnew and wears a toupée. It must be strange and sad for a generation that knew Sinatra as a skinny boy with a brush cut to hear him today singing about facing "the final curtain." When the idols of your youth have aged, it's a pretty clear indication that you've aged too.

I can't imagine John Lennon at 60, or Bob Dylan's frizzy halo gone white. Others who would have been inconceivable growing old have saved us from the discomfort of conceiving it by dying young: Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix. But the one whose identity is most closely tied in my mind to youth--his and mine--is still alive, and over 30 now. I try to picture Mick Jagger giving a farewell concert--still strutting, but gingerly, from arthritis, not even old, but simply at an age that is no longer young: 46, and combing his hair to hide a bald spot. I draw a blank at that, so I picture a teen-aged girl with a face faintly like my own, but dressed in something I imagine to be the style of the 21st century, retrieving a record album from a dusty attic--and playing it for her friends, quiet and respectful, as if she were visiting a museum.

The Stones' early record jackets were black and white. Even in those early days they didn't smile, but they wore coats and ties. By the late sixties their mode of dress had changed. "Sticky Fingers," the last album I bought, showed a close-up of Mick Jagger's fly, with an actual zipper that unzipped to reveal pink flesh. These records are the artifacts of my teens.

The first time I heard the Rolling Stones was in 1965, which I was 12. I had seen and loved the Beatles but this was entirely different. The Beatles were round-faced and bouncy, and if they wanted to hug or kiss you, it was in a friendly way. The Rolling Stones were never cuddly, even on Sunday night TV, and in the company of Ed Sullivan, holloweyed, cold, looking a bit evil, they were leopards to the Beatles' springer spaniels, and I thought they were marvelous.

The Stones touched off what were, I think, my first adult sexual rumblings. There was nothing teeny bopperish in my feeling for the Rolling Stones. I didn't scream at the sight of them or paste their pictures on my walls. I don't suppose I understood what I felt when I put on "Satisfaction" and danced in front of the mirror or lay in bed at night as Mick Jagger pleaded, "Come on baby, cry to me."

My parents didn't perceive the Rolling Stones as different from any other group I listened to--it was all long hair and electric guitars--and they held a fairly benign, even indulgent attitude. They even gave me Stones records for my birthday. I think I felt some unease about that, as a girl whose mother gives her a prescription for the pill, or a boy whose father drives him to pick up an ounce of hash. They were simply anxious to share in my enthusiasm, of course, but I didn't much want to make this a public concern, to take the Rolling Stones out of the dark caves I inhabited with them and into cheery, yellow- curtained sunlight.

It is a problem for most 12-year-old girls--and certainly it was for me--that their bodies rarely match their minds. So while the young girl lies in the dark and dreams of being the one who will, at last, give Mick Jagger his Satisfaction, the next morning she must go to school and give an oral report on Bolivia.

I wrote wildly pornographic books when I was in junior high and fantasized about a love affair with my math teacher, but when I went--alone--to dances, my partner (if I danced at all) would be some wise guy with a hand buzzer and a cowlick. It seems to me now a fairly poignant picture: two 13- or 14-year-olds sitting stiffly on folding chairs across the room from one another, the boy crossing to the girl, grunting something that indicates he'd consent to dance with her, and then jerking frantically--eyes never meeting, bodies never touching--under a crepe paper tulip for three minutes while the Rolling Stones sing "Let's spend the night together, Now I need you more than ever. . . ." And then, when the song is over, the two stop abruptly and go back to their chairs without a word.

The slow songs were even more strained. If the boy bumped into the girl's elbow in the halls the next day, he would mumble "Excuse me," but for the duration of "Michelle" or "As Tears Go By" the couple would rock back and forth over the same two squares of linoleum, the boy's hand on the girl's back in a location that had been given no small amount of consideration the day before. And once again the two would, very likely, say nothing.

So the songs became terrifically important. Oh, not that we always listened so carefully to the words. Often they were simply "She loves you, yeah, yeah, yeah" or "Jumpin Jack Flash, it's a gas, gas, gas. . . ." But the music was in some way eloquent, passionate in a way that we, often, were not. I would be interested to know how many girls have lost their virginity in cars while something by the Beatles or the Stones was playing on the radio, supplying the atmosphere that a Ford Mustang and a six pack of Budweiser lacked. I can remember endless high-school parties with couples entwined on couches all around the room, and then, when the music stopped, some boy breaking away to change the record, as if the magic would stop when the music did.

It would be surprising if we didn't have fairly emotional feelings about the musicians who provided the soundtrack for our adolescence--for some, because they expressed our love, for some because they voiced our anger. The Rolling Stones were pretty clearly Bad Boys, and I was a Good Girl. What I loved about them, I think, was the sense of danger and anarchy they conveyed. As one who still cared desperately about pleasing her parents and getting into a good college, I admired the Stones for their appearance of not caring an awful lot about anything.

I couldn't picture Mick Jagger with his mother, or with a baby, or even a wife. He was dangerous and satanic, and he filled the needs of a generation of Natalie

Woods for a James Dean with a leather jacket in a fast car. The Rolling Stones were not boys our mothers would like--which made them more appealing, of course.

And they were--are--terrific rock musicians. They wouldn't have been able to move people, in non-musical ways, if they hadn't been. But while you can separate the social impact of certain kinds of music from its sheer musical value, rock must always remain linked to its audience: when you attend a concert at Fisher Hall, you listen; when you hear the Stones, even if it's just a record, you participate. And the effect they will have on you will be determined not only by the drums and the guitars and the voices, but by the crowd, and the person you've come with, and who is President at the time and what wars we're involved in. "Satisfaction" and "Honky Tonk Woman" are as good for dancing as they ever were, and I'll never throw out my Stones albums, but I rarely listen to them any more either. Partly it's just that I've changed. These are songs to be played at top volume when there are parents around to be rebelled against (one no longer needs one's picket signs when the revolution's over); these are songs for kids parked on dead-end roads Friday nights with the car radio on; these are songs for college dormitories and steaming cities. My life has changed from that.

But the times have changed, too, because even in the dormitories they're playing a different kind of music. Climbing the stairs in a friend's fifth-floor room at Yale, with strains of songs fading in and out as I come into and then pass out of range, I hear the soundtrack to a Broadway musical and then John Denver--sweet, melodic songs about mountains and babies; how Mick Jagger would demolish him with a glance. I hear Barbra Streisand and country banjos, and, aged but unmistakable, Frank Sinatra.

Plenty of people must be listening to the Rolling Stones, too; tickets for their American tour concerts this month sold out almost instantly, and it's surely more than nostalgia that's making people buy them. There isn't much good rock music being produced these days and the Stones are probably the best. But I don't know if these are times suited for rock music.

I will go to the Rolling Stones concert, and in preparation I have taken out my old Stones albums and listened to them all. I feel the beat still, and the fine, surly tone, but the compulsion to get up and dance is gone. Now I like to waltz.

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