

YOU GET WHAT YOU NEED

I got to watch a new documentary about Keith Richards and listen to his new solo album, *Crosseyed Heart*

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I WAS PLANNING to write on something very different for the column this time – a new album by a relatively new and young bluesman, Gary Clark, Jr; the recording of a recent gig by Phish, which I'd downloaded and how it sounded when heard through a digital-analog converter (a new acquisition!); and about a rediscovery of Frank Zappa and The Mothers of Invention's weird and experimental *Weasels Ripped My Flesh* from 1970. Then, last Sunday, Keith Richards happened and all of those plans were tossed.

When I said 'happened' I meant two things that took place on the same day: I got to watch Netflix's new documentary, *Keith Richards: Under the Influence*, and I got to buy his just-released solo album (the first in 23 years), *Crosseyed Heart*. The docu has a provocative title. And if you're familiar with the facts (and the fiction) surrounding the Rolling Stones' 71-year-old guitarist you may think that it may be referring to substances (ingestible in different ways) that are often mentioned in association with Richards. It is not. The thing that he's under the influence of in the film is the blues, the American genre that was the real motivation for Richards, Mick Jagger and their other bandmates to form The Rolling Stones.

As Richards says in the film, two albums had a huge influence on his music and they also probably triggered the formation of the band. These were: *The Best of Muddy Waters*; and Chuck Berry's *Rockin' At The Hops*. In the film, in his famously gravelly voice, Richards recounts many anecdotes. One of them goes back to 1960 when, one day, he



SYMPATHY FOR THE DEVIL

Keith Richards: Under the Influence takes us to the other side of the Rolling Stones' guitarist – beyond the image of a joint smoking, bourbon quaffing outlaw to a man for whom music is everything

band; of a gig with the towering Howlin' Wolf; and of Richards collaborating with Tom Waits.

If the film is to be chased with something, it has to be with Richards' new album, *Crosseyed Heart*. It's a quintessential blues album, recorded the old fashioned way on tape and produced by Richards and drummer Steve Jordan. Richards' old band, The X-Pensive Winos, play with him as does Norah Jones, who sings a duet on one of the songs, *Illusion*. The album begins with the song, *Crosseyed Heart*, a short, acoustic old-style blues song. Richards sounds relaxed and comfortable as a man who's doing something he enjoys thoroughly and is in total control throughout the album. On the best track of the album, *Trouble*, the trademark guitar licks are pure Richards; as they are on *Heartstopper*. The lyrics on the 15 tracks are about a lover spurned; about running from the law; about introspections into life... all fairly common blues themes, but it is Richards' smoke and booze ravaged voice, which can be incredibly gentle, and his effortless guitar playing that makes this album what it is: an absolute must-listen.

Listening to the album shortly after watching the film, I could visualise Richards playing the songs: his wrinkle-lined face; his innate sense of humour; the twinkle in his eye; and his gnarled fingers running along the fretboard. In the film, director Morgan Neville takes us to the other side of Keith Richards – beyond the stereotypical image of a joint smoking, bourbon quaffing, death-defying outlaw to a man for whom music is everything and the stage and recording studio are what would seem to be his home. The album is an eerie parallel to the film – you can hear in the blues that he plays how deeply and seriously this genre has influenced him.

Early in the film, Richards talks about growing up and how he'd once thought that life beyond 30 would be "horrible". Of course, by the time he'd crossed that milestone that thought disappeared. He says that he thinks "you're not grown up until they put you six feet under". In that case, I hope Richards doesn't ever grow up.

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START ME UP

In *Keith Richards: Under the Influence*, Richards recounts how he bumped into his childhood friend, Jagger and the seeds of the Stones' were sown in 1960. (Below, the two in a 1968 photograph)



boarded his usual train to get to art school and bumped into his childhood friend, Jagger, who had the two albums under his arm. The two bonded over the blues and the seeds of the Stones' were sown. Another anecdote is about the Stones' first visit to the US and to Chess studio where Muddy Waters, whom Richards idolised, was up on a ladder painting the ceiling. Yet another narrates an incident where Chuck Berry, known for having a volatile temper, caught Richards touching the strings on one of his guitars in his dressing room and "slammed" him. It was one of "his greatest hits", chuckles Richards.

The film is punctuated with Richards talking about music – the blues mainly; about how he thinks he's better at the bass guitar than at playing the lead; about his mother who introduced him to great musicians such as Sarah Vaughan, Billie Holiday and Ella Fitzgerald; and about listening to American music of the 1950s via pirate radio stations, which operated illegally out of ships anchored off the shore. Not to be missed is the footage of early performances by the