

# The Greatest Rock and Soul Band in the World? The Rolling Stones, genre and race

LEE MARSHALL 

University of Bristol, Bristol BS8 1QU, UK

E-mail: [l.marshall@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:l.marshall@bristol.ac.uk)

## Abstract

*The Rolling Stones played a core role in establishing the generic conventions of rock. A key ideological element of this was the band's reverential dedication to the blues and the importance of the blues to their musical development. However, what is much less recognised is the influence of soul on the band's sound. By looking at the band's repertoire, composition and performing style, this paper explores the influence that soul, particularly Southern soul, had on the band's formative years and argues that, in many ways, they have adopted the aesthetic conventions of soul, rather than rock, for the majority of their career. Rethinking The Stones' style in this way may help us better understand their position in the rock canon, while also encouraging careful interrogation of the racialised division of rock and soul that emerged in the late 1960s.*

The Rolling Stones are the archetypal, indeed one might even say, the prototypical rock group: there at the beginning and seemingly intent to stay until the end, the group helped establish many of the musical and stylistic conventions that have come to define the genre. One key trope, one that is vital to rock's self-image, is of the band's apparent rootedness in the blues: as the story goes, The Stones were the blues purists whose evangelical need to spread the word inadvertently resulted in a new style of music that enabled white Americans to recognise the music that had been on their doorstep all along. Taking their name from a blues song, a common, if simplistic, equation might be that The Stones are formed of equal parts Muddy Waters and Chuck Berry – albums by whom Mick Jagger was allegedly carrying the day he bumped into Keith Richards on a Dartford railway platform, the band's own version of the Robert Johnson crossroads myth.

The fact that they are, at heart, a blues band is an idea continually reinforced by commentators, both popular and academic. One BBC radio documentary described the band's relationship to the blues as:

One of the most enduring love affairs in music history ... the blues is the artform that helped shaped the band's sound and ... the glue that has helped keep them together. (BBC 2018)

Meanwhile the introduction to *The Cambridge Companion To The Rolling Stones* states:

Adapting to and in many cases anticipating new (or retro) trends in popular music during their long career ... the Stones nevertheless remained true to the fundamental stylistic roots and sound of rock and roll: rhythm and blues (R&B), country, and most of all, the blues, to which their indebtedness is reverential. (Coehlo and Covach 2019, p. xix)

Like all myths, this narrative contains a kernel of truth. The young Stones – Brian Jones especially – were beholden to the blues, and they have repeatedly sung the praises of artists like Muddy Waters and Howlin’ Wolf throughout their careers. In this paper, however, I want to outline an often overlooked element of their oeuvre – their debt to soul music. Indeed, I would argue that, for the vast majority of their career, The Stones have owed at least as much to soul, especially Southern soul, as they have to blues, while the band’s musical output has been more aligned with ‘soul’ than with ‘rock’. Furthermore, this alignment has resulted in the band, despite their foundational status, sitting slightly askew from the ‘rock’ canon. I will discuss this further in the final section of the paper, in which I will also elaborate upon the social meanings of labels like ‘soul’ and ‘rock’. For the time being, however, I will keep such definitions open-ended, allowing for a more ‘instinctive’ understandings of the terms while I outline The Stones’ soul credentials, focusing on three broad areas: repertoire, composition, and singing/performing style.

## Repertoire

A simple analysis of the songs that the band has chosen to record over the years makes clear their debt to soul. At the start of their career, their recorded output was dominated by covers of songs by other artists. Yet, despite being ‘blues purists’, on even their earliest albums soul songs have equal billing with blues and rock ‘n’ roll, and their predominance increases as time goes on. Their debut album contains Marvin Gaye’s ‘Can I Get A Witness’ (as well as an ‘original’ instrumental pastiche of it), along with ‘You Can Make It If You Try’ and the Stax-released ‘Walking The Dog’, while their first EP included Arthur Alexander’s ‘You Better Move On’. However, it was the band’s first visits to the USA, in June and November 1964, that really accelerated their appreciation of, and reliance on, soul music. During these visits, the band were exposed to Black American radio for the first time (Bowman 2004, p. 98). In an interview in 1971, Keith Richards said that ‘Nobody realizes how America blew our minds ... Can’t even describe what America meant to us. We first started listenin’ to Otis [Redding] when we got to the States, and picked up our first Stax singles’ (in Greenfield 1971).

The band’s exposure to soul had a decisive impact upon their repertoire. During that first tour of the USA, the band spent time recording at Chess Records’ studio in Chicago. Alongside a predictable array of blues tracks, their recording sessions included Wilson Pickett’s ‘If You Need Me’ and, crucially, their next two singles, both from the soul stable: ‘Time is on My Side’ (including a version complete with gospel organ) and ‘It’s All Over Now’ (written by Bobby and Shirley Womack). By the time of their second visit to the US, in November 1964, they had reached their peak soul period. Richards again:

When we were recording in Chicago and Los Angeles, we used to go down to the local record stores, buy up a whole bunch of soul singles, sit down by the record player and learn 'em – things like 'Oh Baby We Got a Good Thing Going' and the old Otis Redding stuff. Then we'd record 'em as quickly as possible. (In Loog Oldham 2003, p. 11)

The fruits of this practice are most visible on the 1965 album *Out Of Our Heads*, described by Egan as '[seeing] the band exploring another, contrasting, form of American black music: as much smooth soul as gritty blues' (2013, p. 54). It is the most soul-influenced of their early albums, with five of the eight covers (on the UK version of the album) categorisable as soul, including covers of Don Covay, Sam Cooke, Otis Redding and Marvin Gaye, as well as a cover of Chuck Berry's 'Talkin' About You' that owes more to Stax than Chess.

While it is sometimes recognised that The Stones went through something of a 'soul phase' in 1964/1965, I would suggest that – partly because of the impact it had upon their nascent songwriting, discussed below – a more fundamental transformation occurred. The 1964 trips to America were of crucial importance to the band's development. As Bowman notes, they 'came to North America a blues band ... They returned home steeped in the sounds of soul' (2004, p. 98). By the time they returned for their third North American tour in April 1965, Brian Jones – the most dedicated blues acolyte in the band – when asked about his favourite artists, would reply, 'We all like virtually the same American artists. We like James Brown, Solomon Burke, Wilson Pickett and people like that' (in Paytress 2005, p. 89).<sup>1</sup>

It was around this time that original compositions began to replace covers in the band's recorded output. Many of these, especially in the crucial 1964/1965 period, reflect their new-found soul influence, which will be discussed in the next section. However, even as original songs began to dominate their albums, their tendency towards soul covers does not disappear: The Temptations' 'Ain't Too Proud to Beg' on 'It's Only Rock and Roll', 'Just My Imagination' (Temptations again) on *Some Girls*, 'Going to a Go-Go' (The Miracles) on *Still Life*, 'Harlem Shuffle' (Bob and Earl) on *Dirty Work* ... From the 1970s onwards, if a Stones' album contains a cover it is, more often than not, a soul cover. Their solo albums too – especially those by Jagger and Ron Wood – also include a liberal array of soul covers.

## Composition

The band transitioned from being an exclusively covers band to mainly recording self-penned material over the period 1963–1965, led by the songwriting partnership of Mick Jagger and Keith Richards. In the first year of their songwriting, they predominantly composed pop ballads for other singers. Very few of their songs were deemed suitable for the band.

Whether simple coincidence, the result of improved songwriting ability after months of practice, or something more substantive, Jagger and Richards' songwriting took a notable step forward around the time of those two formative visits to the USA in which they received such significant exposure to soul records. Richards described the way in which soul started to become more of an influence on them:

<sup>1</sup> There are many factors to consider, but Jones' decline as the clear leader of the band, and the rise of Jagger and Richards, could potentially be connected to the band's shifting musical trajectory from blues to soul in their early days.

We were listening to a lot of soul music at the time, but to us soul music was very sophisticated and required more instrumentation . . . When we found out how much more variety there was in soul music, we saw more and more of the connection between that and what we were doing. (In Loewenstein and Dodd 2004, pp. 91–2)

Richards' account of how they initially viewed soul as 'very sophisticated' speaks to me of the band having initial awareness of Motown records – several Motown artists had released singles in the UK in the early 1960s, to which British musicians interested in Black American music may well have been attuned – but of having no or minimal awareness of Southern Soul until their visits to the USA. This is hardly surprising given that even by 'mid-1965 white America barely knew [Stax] existed, and among black Americans in Los Angeles and New York, in general, the label's releases fell far behind those of Motown, Atlantic, Chess, and VeeJay in sales and radio play' (Bowman 2006, ch. 5). However, it was Southern Soul that proved to be most influential in shaping The Stones' sound: it is notable that the 'favourite artists' mentioned by Jones in 1965 all came from the South, while in the 1971 interview quoted above, Richards explicitly recalled hearing Otis Redding and Stax singles. The connection between The Stones' sound and Stax will be returned to shortly.

In terms of composition, two original songs recorded in the month after the first US trip are noteworthy: 'Heart of Stone' is a full-on soul ballad, while in 'Surprise, Surprise' Jagger adopts a preacher-like singing style characteristic of soul (Jagger's vocal style is discussed in the next section). It is in late 1964 and early 1965, when they begin to imitate the sound of Southern soul bands more explicitly, that their songwriting really blossoms, however. The most significant song in this regard is their breakthrough record, '(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction'. 'Satisfaction' sounds noticeably different from Stones singles that went before it. In particular, the guitar riff that propels the song forward has a fatter, more earthy character. The riff in 'Satisfaction' has a greater presence, taking up more sonic space than the Chuck Berry influenced rhythm guitar in 'It's All Over Now', for example.<sup>2</sup> The different sound was achieved by using a fuzz tone – an electronic device designed to create a distorted output from the guitar. However, Richards' account of why the fuzz tone was utilised reveals a core element of The Stones' soul platform:

In 'Satisfaction' I was imagining horns, trying to imitate their sound to put on the track later when we recorded. I'd already heard the riff in my head the way that Otis Redding did it later, thinking, 'this is gonna be the horn line'. But we didn't have any horns, and I was only going to lay down a dub. The fuzz tone came in handy so I could give a shape to what the horns were supposed to do. (2010, p. 177)

This 'dub' was subsequently released as a single, supposedly without the band's knowledge. It is possible that this account contains some post-hoc rationalisation, given how enamoured The Stones were with Redding's cover of 'Satisfaction', released later in 1965 (indeed, for most of their career, the band has effectively covered Redding's version of the song in concert). However, Richards has been remarkably consistent in his account, and it rings true given that the song was composed at a time when the band was clearly being influenced by soul recordings quite directly, and recorded around the same time as many of the soul covers that would

<sup>2</sup> The band played a remarkable, full-on Southern soul arrangement of 'It's All Over Now' at the London Palladium on 22 January 1967, featuring an impressive soul vocal performance from Jagger.

appear on *Out Of Our Heads*. They were finding ‘more and more of the connection between that and what we were doing’.

Richards’ use of guitars to imitate horns is of fundamental importance in understanding the band’s distinctive sound, and I will return to it shortly. There are other features of *Satisfaction* that hint at The Stones’ soul credentials, however. Jagger’s vocal performance begins in a controlled manner at the start of each chorus before releasing an explosion of pent-up energy as he tries and he tries and he tries and he tries, while the lyric of ‘Hey! Hey! Hey!’ and ‘No! No! No!’ enable him to seemingly extemporise (something he had also done on the previous single, ‘The Last Time’). ‘Satisfaction’ also marks the first time that Charlie Watts makes use of the triplet shuffle on record, with the whole song driven along by his ‘stomping, Stax-like drum beat’ (Egan 2013, p. 48).

That invocation of Stax is apt as there are many similarities between The Stones’ musical style and that of Stax’s house band, The MGs. In a 1995 article, musicologist Rob Bowman provides a detailed analysis of the musical features that make up ‘The Stax sound’. While not seeking to provide a line-by-line match between both bands, I want here to highlight some significant similarities between ‘The Stax sound’ and ‘The Stones sound’, focusing specifically on the ‘simple’ rhythm section, the importance of groove, and the ideology of ‘less is more’, as well as returning to the issue of Richards’ guitar functioning as a pseudo-horn section.

Describing the contribution of the rhythm section to the Stax sound, Bowman describes Al Jackson as ‘a simple drummer. He generally avoided embellishments of all kinds, including drum fills typically found at the end of four- and eight-bar patterns in much popular music’ (1995, p. 309). While not always eschewing drum fills, Charlie Watts was widely known as a similarly restrained drummer, who ‘never overplayed his hand, never chased flashy fills, never competed with the rest of the band for air space, never played anything just because he could’ (Edison 2019, ch. 1). Watts himself expressed admiration for Jackson’s style, saying ‘I can play like Al Jackson, but I’m not him doing it ... There are a lot of people who can play like Al Jackson, but they’re not Al Jackson and never, ever will be. They’ll never be as good as he is’ (1982, in Flans 2017). He has also commented positively that ‘Al Jackson was probably ten times simpler than I am ... To be able to play as slow as Al Jackson is almost impossible’ (in Edison 2019, ch. 7).

The comparison between Jackson and Watts is not purely a matter of simplicity or refinement, it is also a matter of timing. Bowman notes how the musical interaction between guitarist Steve Cropper and drummer Al Jackson created a ‘minutely delayed’ backbeat that is one of the most distinctive features of the Stax sound (2006, ch. 4). Similarly, in The Stones, Watts also plays fractionally behind the backbeat:

Technically, what it is, is that he leads with his right foot on the kick drum, which pushes the band forward. Meanwhile his left hand on the snare, the backbeat, is a little relaxed, a little lazy – and that combination of propulsion and relaxation is the technical definition of what he’s doing. But you can try it yourself, all you want, and it ain’t going to sound like Charlie. (Stewart Copeland, in Beaumont-Thomas 2021)<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> It is notable how Copeland asserts the non-imitability of Watts’ style in much the same way that Watts did of Jackson.

The delayed backbeat in both bands is explained by the interaction between the drummer and the guitarist. In The MGs, guitarist Steve Cropper explained the delay as resulting from recording without headphones in a large room, and so he would anticipate the drum beat, responding to Jackson's hands rather than what he heard (in Bowman 2006, ch. 4). In contrast, in The Stones, bassist Bill Wyman explains the delay as resulting from the drummer playing off the guitarist:

Every rock 'n' roll band follows the drummer, right? If the drummer slows down, the band slows down with him or speeds up when he does. That's just the way it works – except for our band. Our band does not follow the drummer; our drummer follows the rhythm guitarist, who is Keith Richards. Immediately you've got something like a 1/100th of a second delay between the guitar and Charlie's lovely drumming. Now, I'm not putting Charlie down in any way for doing this, but on stage, you have to follow Keith ... So with Charlie following Keith, you have that very minute delay. (1978, quoted in Flans 2017)

Wyman himself also plays a vital role in creating the 'extremely tight rhythmic riffs, built from the bottom up' (Bowman 1995, p. 310, describing Stax) that are important to The Stones' sound. Like Watts, Wyman is known for his understated playing and, in this, a formative influence was Stax's own Duck Dunn (Wyman once described his key influences as 'Duck Dunn, Willie Dixon, Duck Dunn, Duck Dunn and Duck Dunn' (in Ashdown 2011)). Bowman describes Dunn's basslines as tending towards the 'functional. 'It's simplicity, [but] simple can be complicated', asserted Dunn' (1995, p. 310). Wyman equally sought that simplicity:

I tried to play with the simplicity of Duck Dunn ... he was there, he didn't stick out. He didn't get in the way of anybody. He just did the right things in the right spaces. His timing was perfect. That's what I tried to do. (In Inman 2011)

I don't regard myself as an incredible bass player. I'm very efficient and I do my job very well and I'm not noticed, and that's the way it should be ... You just sit with the drums and build the basics of the song – you know, foundations. That's what I learned from Duck Dunn. (In Willman 2019)

The solid, unfussy, foundations laid down by Watts and Wyman form the platform for Richards' rhythm guitar, and here I want to return to the idea of Richards seeking to imitate horn parts on guitar. As previously explained, Richards viewed the use of the fuzz tone on 'Satisfaction' as 'a little sketch because, to my mind, the fuzz tone was really there to denote what the horns would be doing' (in Loewenstein and Dodd 2004, p. 90). Despite the success of 'Satisfaction', however, there are no further examples of Richards using a fuzz tone on his guitar, although he does use a fuzz tone on a bass guitar for two songs on 1966's *Aftermath* album: 'Under My Thumb' and 'Think' (the latter provides perhaps the most blatant example of Richards imitating a horn section). Generally, though, the period from 1965 to 1967 is characterised by a diversity of different sounds and styles as the band entered their imperial pop phase. It is in the late 1960s and early 1970s, after the band return from a relatively quiet period following the much-criticised psychedelic album, *Their Satanic Majesties Request*, that guitar-as-horn-section becomes something of a *modus operandi* for Richards. This is probably connected to his discovery of open guitar tunings – when each string on a guitar is tuned to the notes of one chord, so that chord can be strummed without any fretting – which occurred in 1968. Initially Richards experimented with open E and open D tunings ('Jumpin' Jack Flash', and

‘Street Fighting Man’, respectively) before settling on five string open G (‘Honky Tonk Women’), which has been his most common tuning ever since. These new tunings ‘allowed Richards more facility in the creation of chord-based riffs ... the transition effectively allowed Richards to repurpose the rhythm guitar as a lead instrument’ (Hamilton 2016, ch. 6). Richards described the opportunities afforded by open tuning for riff-based compositions thus: ‘for rhythm work ... ordinarily [in standard tuning], when you change chords, the previous chord is completely dead. With the five string, you get a kind of drone going all the way through’ (1974, in Dalton and Farren 1980, p. 100). Whether this characteristic is what enables a guitar-as-horn approach, it certainly impacted Richards’ compositional style and, from this point on, Richards’ guitar style dominates the band’s sound, with his fluid and full-bodied riffs insistently propelling songs forward. This style perhaps reaches its apex with the 1972 album ‘Exile On Main Street’, particularly on ‘Tumbling Dice’. It is, however, a consistent feature of the band’s style ever since, including on stage. As he states in his autobiography, ‘I find myself trying to play horn lines all the time on the guitar’ (2010, p. 107).<sup>4</sup>

Taken together, the relationship between the simple/efficient rhythm section and the rhythm-guitar-playing-horn-parts are, I would argue, the essence of The Rolling Stones’ sound. It has its own distinctive flavour but it is based on the same principles as the Stax sound in two key regards. The first is following what Bowman describes as ‘general precept [that was] operative at Stax, simply that “less is more”’ (1995, p. 302), with Booker T. Jones defining their aim as ‘get[ting] largeness out of sparseness’ (Bowman 1995). The second is that both the Stax sound and the Stones sound are groove-oriented: ‘The composite whole of all these intersecting rhythmic parts ... can be termed a “groove”. The key to much of this music is that it is groove-based’ (Bowman 1995, p. 311). Rhythm is prioritised over melodic and harmonic considerations (Bowman 1995, p. 314) and songs are built from the groove up, something that music producer and head of Atlantic Records Jerry Wexler referred to as:

the Southern way of recording that I had learned in Memphis and Muscle Shoals: to build the song organically what you did, you had the musicians start to play these chords, and just playing the chords the guitarist or a keyboard man would come up with a lick or an idea, and after a while – it never took too long – a rhythm pattern would be established that would really be the basis of the song. (In Randall 2009, p. 63)

Wexler’s description also captures The Stones’ compositional practices from the 1970s onwards – although it was not the case that ‘it never took long’. Indeed, the band would spend hours in the studio engaged in meandering jams seeking to lock onto an underlying groove. Ultimately, it was finding the groove that mattered:

As long as the bass and drums have got a groove going from the minute the record starts til the end ... As long as the rhythm section is *there* – you can do anything. If I’m right along with them, it helps even more. (Richards, in Dalton and Farren 1980, p. 100)

This orientation towards groove can also be seen in the relative lack of instrumental solos in The Stones’ output and in the way in which the vocal is often lower in the

<sup>4</sup> During much of their stadium-rock era, the band employed a three or four piece horn section to translate Richards’ guitar-as-horn lines into *actual* horn lines, most notably on songs such as ‘Tumbling Dice’ and ‘Honky Tonk Women’. Richards’ rhythm guitar undoubtedly remains the driving force, however.

mix than conventional rock songs, both of which are noted by Bowman as characteristic of Stax recordings (1995, pp. 294, 318). It is to consideration of the vocal and performing style of the band's singer that I now turn.

## Singing/performance

Mick Jagger is obviously known as one of the most iconic performers in rock and has been influential in developing tropes that have become conventional within rock performance. Where he has been most influential, however, is less to do with singing techniques and much more to do with performing style. And, in these elements, he has been extremely influenced by the conventions of soul. Here I will briefly note three factors: his use of vocables and extra-lyrical phrasing; his 'kinetic', whole body interaction with the music; and his 'outward-directed' orientation towards the audience.

Soul is widely understood to have developed out of black gospel music in the USA, with 'many of its vocal cues [coming] from gospel' (Potter 2008, p. 144). In particular, extra-lyrical vocal utterances drawn from the black sermon tradition (for example, 'that's right' and 'yes, it is') as well as non-lexical vocables ('uh- huh', 'mmm') are used to add emphasis to the performance and engage the audience, sometimes in explicit call and response engagements (Randall 2009, p. 47). Potter suggests that soul singing is 'more participatory' than blues and rock 'n' roll, describing James Brown as 'not just a singer, but an exhorter' engaged in an 'ongoing dialogue with his audience' (2008, p. 145).

It is clear that this kind of extra-lyrical phrasing is a key part of Jagger's vocal performances – the 'yeah's, 'alright's and 'well's are integral to his singing of a song, not inessential extras. They may not necessarily create the same emotional impact as some canonical soul singers such as Otis Redding and Sam Cooke but he is certainly working within the same field. And he is certainly working within the same field as Brown when it comes to audience exhortation – his 'Everybody say "Ow!"', 'Is everybody having a good time tonight?' and chorus singalongs may have become rock stereotypes but they have their roots in the call and response traditions of gospel and soul. Commenting on The Stones in 2003, Elvis Costello's description of Jagger echoes Potter's description of Brown: 'The Stones are a big band in miniature. They've got this front man who's a cheerleader, not like a singer in the conventional sense; he doesn't hold notes, [but] he's got this presence that you can't help watching' (in Hepworth 2003, p. 64).

The comparison between Brown and Jagger is not coincidental, for Brown was a formative influence on the up-and-coming British singer – initially through Brown's 1963 *Live At The Apollo* album (Gundersen 2014) but, more fundamentally, in person. The band's aforementioned visits to the USA in 1964 were important not simply because of the access they gave them to new records but also because they allowed them to see performances by leading artists in blues, rock 'n' roll, and soul. One specific trip to see Brown at the Apollo Theater in New York, probably during their second visit to the US in late 1964, has been referenced several times by various band members, including Jagger:

I went to see him at the Apollo and I was blown away. I was impressed by how hard he worked and how he had the audience in the palm of his hand. That was a learning experience for me. (In Gundersen 2014)



Several commentators have described witnessing Jagger practising Brown moves in the weeks and months following that visit, and his own performances in late 1964 and 1965 took on this new dimension. The Stones' early manager, Giorgio Gomelsky stated that 'That was when the Mick Jagger that we know began ... When Mick got off the plane back in London, he was doing the James Brown slide' (in Norman 1984, p. 149).

The connection between Jagger's and Brown's performance styles is not simple imitation, however, but rather seems to be something more fundamental about their technique, and the role of dancing within the black popular music tradition. As Portia Maultsby highlights, 'total physical involvement through the use of the entire body' – what she calls 'kinetic activity' – is 'central to the aesthetic of soul' (2014, p. 384). Reflecting its historical origins in gospel, the body becomes a site through which emotion is intensified, creating a 'unification of song and dance' (Burnim in Maultsby 2014). Dancing in this aesthetic is not simply dancing; rather, the performer acts as a kind of lightning rod capturing and intensifying the energy released by the musicians. Jagger has picked up on this fundamental issue in interviews several times during his career:

It wasn't just the moves he made – it was the energy he put into it that was amazing. It didn't seem to be a routine, as such. ... Dancing is in it, but the big thing is dancing and drums are the total connection, and it's very ancient and primitive, in the best sense of the word ... Drums and dancing, the interpretation of the rhythm, has to be the earliest and most primeval expression of the human spirit – you the dancer and the drummer. James Brown was totally in that. He and the drummer were in total sync. That was obvious when you saw them. In its most expressive you see it in African dancing, Indian dance. I have to be together with Charlie Watts, and he is aware of that. If he's not doing what my feet are, it doesn't work. Obviously other instruments come into it. Performing is all to do with interpreting the song and the beat which is propelling you. (In Jagger 2012)

This connection between the feet and the drums was noted first-hand by choreographer Toni Basil, who saw both Brown and Jagger perform in close proximity in late 1964 at the TAMI show – a studio-recorded concert film featuring an eclectic range of rock 'n' roll, soul and 'rock' performers.<sup>5</sup> She noted the intrinsic similarities between their performing styles:

It was fantastic – Mick's moves. What is this? This kind of paraplegic funky chicken. What is he doing? ... I had never seen such moves in my life ... Mick was doing physicalities that no one had ever seen before, in the same way that James Brown was doing physicalities that no one had ever seen before. Elvis Presley, James Brown and Mick Jagger had some similarities regarding dancing. They moved exactly to the beat. They understood the backbeat ... Mick always danced to the beat. Elvis, James and Mick *nailed* the beat. (In Loog Oldham 2003, p. 150)

The final aspect of Jagger's performance style that connects him to the soul aesthetic – his orientation towards the audience – is also one in which he was significantly influenced by Brown. In a round of interviews in 2014, to promote a biopic of Brown that he had part-financed, Jagger highlighted Brown's 'working' of his audience:

Of course I copied the moves ... [but] It wasn't so much about the moves. It's about presence on stage in relationship to the audience. (In Getlen 2014)

<sup>5</sup> Brown was angry that the show's producers insisted that The Stones should close the show. Jagger was actually asked by the producers to talk to Brown to calm him down.

He never left the audience bored. He involved the audience and kept them amused and entertained. He gave his best in every show. (In Gundersen 2014)

The latter quote in particular could easily be someone else's description of Jagger. Jagger's performance style has what I would call an 'outward-facing' orientation – his performances are oriented towards the audience, 'whereas other performers in white rock 'n' roll, especially English bands, don't do that much' (Jagger, in Loewenstein and Dodd 2004, p. 86). On stage, he is locked into a continual dialogue with the audience; he never 'loses himself' in a song. This is in contrast to a performer like Bob Dylan, say, who is much more 'inward-facing', absorbing himself in the emotional and lyrical content of the song, sometimes almost to the exclusion of the audience. Borrowing loosely from Andrew Chester's categorisation of intensional and extensional aesthetics (1990), the inward-facing approach stems from a blues aesthetic, heavily valued in rock, in which performances are understood as personally and emotionally expressive. In contrast, the outward-facing orientation is more characteristic of gospel and soul. Through the use of extra-lyrical exhortations and kinetic activity, soul performers use audience engagement 'to explore the full range of aesthetic possibilities ... increas[ing] the intensity of the performance ... This form of [audience] participation is the most important criterion by which soul singers determine whether they are meeting the aesthetic expectations of their audiences' (Maultsby 2014, p. 384).

In all of the above ways, it is clear that Jagger is performing in the same 'mode' as canonical soul singers like Brown and Redding. There is, however, a relative 'thinness' to Jagger's voice, in contrast to the full-throated vocal qualities of these canonical singers that may disguise some of the connections. George actually suggests that this is fairly typical of white singers, arguing that 'in the sixties white musicians had difficulty synthesizing their own version of soul ... primarily because white singers just couldn't match the intense vocal style' of black performers (1988, p. 107). Indeed, perhaps one of the main reasons that the soul foundations of The Stones have not been more fully recognised is that Jagger doesn't *sound* like a soul singer and, in terms of his actual singing, he demonstrates clear blues (and country) influences. There is also a significant layer of irony within Jagger's persona that can create emotional distance from the material (although this is not always the case). Nonetheless, I would argue that in terms of performing style, Jagger performs in a soul idiom much more than he does in those of blues or blues-based rock. His most important influences certainly come from soul.

### Discussion: The Stones, genre, rock, soul and race

The preceding discussion offers evidence of how the core components of The Rolling Stones' sound and performing style could be seen as reflecting many stylistic conventions associated with 'soul'. The unfussy, 'tight but loose' rhythm section provide a foundation for a pair of interlocking guitars, led by Richards' 'guitar-as-horns' riff-based style that propel their songs forward. Their sound 'rests on the unrelenting propulsiveness of their groove' (Bowman 2004, p. 99), with relatively few guitar solos. The aim is to make the audience move, with the groove providing a platform for a preacher-style frontman who excels at working the crowd. This style is especially oriented towards live performance and, while inherent in their early work, it perhaps becomes fully formed in the early 1970s, becoming their *modus operandi* since then. This is not intended to suggest that there is *no* blues influence in the

band's sound, nor that they did not consider themselves as blues acolytes early in their career (although Brian Jones was by far the most obsessed with the blues and he had lost his leadership role in the band by 1965). There clearly are elements of the band that we could directly link to a blues heritage.<sup>6</sup> However, the style I have outlined here is, I would argue, what makes the band's sound distinctive, and it owes more to soul, especially the 'Southern Soul' produced at Stax and Muscle Shoals than to any other genre. Thus, despite being seen as a foundational 'rock' act, musically it might make sense to think of The Stones as a soul band rather than a rock group. Regular use of soul covers, live and on record, throughout their career – much more so than blues covers – also indicates that this is where the band sees their 'home turf'.

Of course, one may notice that I have so far avoided providing any precise definition of 'soul'. It is possible to argue that the features I've emphasised are not essential characteristics of soul, or that to talk of 'soul' ignores the significant differences between, say, the 'soul' produced by Motown in Detroit, the 'soul' produced at Stax or the FAME studios at Muscle Shoals and the 'soul' produced by PIR in Philadelphia, even before any consideration of the porous boundaries between soul and neighbouring genres such as R&B and funk. Although I will discuss the connection between R&B and soul shortly, this absence of a clear definition is deliberate because the main purpose of this discussion – other than to offer insight into The Rolling Stones – is to problematise genre divisions rather than reinforce them. By analysing The Stones through the lens of soul, I am questioning the division itself rather than simply claiming them to be in the wrong camp (although I do think being in the 'wrong camp' affects how the band is perceived). What does it mean for 'rock' if one of its archetypes might be better described as 'soul'? And while I do think that The Stones' sound is distinctive, they are not necessarily alone in having a significant connection to soul: for example, Hamilton describes the significance of Motown to The Beatles (acknowledged by the group with their *Rubber Soul* album title) (2016, pp. 121–68), while Dinerstein (2007) argues that Bruce Springsteen should be understood more as a soul performer than a rock one. Furthermore, Led Zeppelin bassist John Paul Jones once stated:

[Drummer John Bonham and I] were both huge Motown and Stax fans and general soul music fans, James Brown fans. Which is one of the reasons why I've always said that Zeppelin was one of the few bands to 'swing'. We actually had a groove in those days. People used to come to our shows and dance, which was great . . . You didn't necessarily see that at a Black Sabbath show or whatever, so we were different in that way. (In Long 2002)

One way to make sense of this information is simply to say that it is the nature of genres – they are necessarily broad-brush and the more you hone in on a specific example, the less likely that example is to adhere to the rules of that genre. There is certainly merit in such a view, but these are hardly inconsequential acts. All of them would likely feature in a '10 most important rock acts' list. Perhaps rock owes more to soul, or overlaps with soul, more than is conventionally recognised?<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Nor should we overlook the importance of country music to band's output, although I would argue that the country influence reflects more of a 'borrowing' for certain songs rather than something fundamental to their style.

<sup>7</sup> I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for furnishing me with the Jones quote. That same reviewer suggested that the argument I am making here is more applicable to US rock than to the

Such a suggestion points to the key issue concerning genre: genres are at least as much ideological as they are musicological. Genre labels reflect and police social boundaries, serving to demarcate who is in and out of particular populations, cultures, audiences and so on. With regard to the present discussion, the key ideological division is race, and is connected to the emergence of the distinct genres of soul and rock in the late 1960s, which established and consolidated a fairly rigid racial segregation within mainstream popular music culture and industry. The Stones, as white musicians, can only fall on the rock side of the cleavage.

The irony is that these segregated genres emerged following a period of unprecedented racial integration within the popular music mainstream. The rise of rock 'n' roll in the mid 1950s had brought the sounds of R&B into the mainstream. From the mid-1950s until the mid-1960s, 'white and black rock 'n' roll styles ... evolved more or less in tandem', with black and white artists 'competing for the same radio and record audiences and appearing in a lot of the same clubs, concert packages, and TV showcases. The pop music world [was] becoming less segregated with every passing year' (Wald 2009, p. 239). Indeed, in 1963, trade magazine *Billboard* stopped publishing a separate R&B singles chart, seemingly because it was becoming harder to maintain a meaningful distinction from its Hot 100 pop chart (see Brackett 2016, ch. 7). Competing magazine *Cash Box* had done the same as far back as 1960, reflecting what they described as '[the lack of] any dividing line between R&B and pop' (in Hughes 2015, p. 36).<sup>8</sup> Brackett (2016, ch. 7) suggests that this erosion of musical boundaries also reflected more general discourses of integration and African-American civil rights within American society. Indeed, Southern Soul – and 'the Memphis Sound' in particular – was often presented as a harbinger of more integrated race relations in the US given the interracial mix of musicians and technicians involved in its production (Hughes 2015, p. 45).

The economic and cultural implications of this 'integration' need proper interrogation, as rewards and opportunities were not equally divided between black and white, but this racially mixed musical culture was the one into which The Stones landed in 1964. However, it is still notable that within this context, The Stones explicitly aligned themselves to black music and black musicians. They 'did not avoid the topic of race, or its salience to their own commercial success' (Hamilton 2016, p. 253). While the phrase rock 'n' roll was something of a whitewashing term that 'dulled the racial identification' of music traditionally associated with blacks, making it more palatable for white consumers (George 1988, p. 67), The Stones consistently

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situation in the UK and that The Stones' style is not anomalous in a UK context. It is certainly true that the emergence of rock and soul that I discuss in this section centres on the US and, reflecting the differing race relations that existed in the countries at the time, it is likely that the racial boundaries/hierarchies within popular music outlined were firmer there than they were in the UK. Nonetheless, those ideologies made their way back to the UK. Indeed, Jones' contrasting of Zeppelin with Black Sabbath indicates an awareness of the trends discussed here existing in the UK context and he is keen to highlight his band as a distinctive outlier. With regard to The Stones, I do think that there is a decisive change in the band that occurs as a result of those 1964 trips to the US when they were exposed to Southern Soul and, therefore, that the features of the band's distinctive style that I am outlining are not solely explained by their Britishness. That said, the transatlantic dynamics of rock, and the musical-racial dynamics of the distinctive UK musical culture from which The Stones emerge, are definitely things that warrant further analysis.

<sup>8</sup> Both magazines reinstated their R&B charts: *Cash Box* in December 1960, after a 9 month absence; *Billboard* in January 1965, after a 14 month absence.

defined themselves as a rhythm and blues band, often explicitly rejecting the rock 'n' roll appellation in early interviews. They mixed with black musicians and recorded at black studios, gaining the respect of many of those musicians, as well as being acknowledged (and well-received) by African-American media in the major urban centres (Hamilton 2016, p. 254). They also had some success on *Billboard's* black music chart ('Satisfaction' reached number 19), reflecting sales in black record shops and airplay on black radio stations.

If I had spent this paper characterising The Rolling Stones as a rhythm and blues band it would likely have had less rhetorical impact. Although sometimes referred to as 'blues purists' the band was clearly a rhythm and blues band in their early days and presented themselves as such. Calling The Stones an R&B band should not be controversial. It also reflects the American situation they first encountered – with 'rhythm and blues' being the genre name used to frame the records released by Stax, Motown and so on (in terms of charts, radio stations, etc.). The issue is what happens next, because in the mid-1960s the word used to describe music made and associated with African-Americans began to change.

While descriptions of performances being 'soulful' had emerged in the first half of the 1960s, the word 'soul' morphed into a noun in the middle years of the decade, becoming a quality that specific performers had (or didn't have). It then became reified as a genre label, with *Billboard* renaming its R&B chart as the 'best-selling soul singles' in August 1969. This emergence of 'soul' as 'the *de facto* term for black popular music' (Brackett 2016, ch. 7) can be connected to a range of things. Musically, it is related to the increasing gospel influence in black secular music (presumably the etymological root for the word's usage). Politically, it can be connected to the Black Power movement's more assertive claims for black identity and citizenship. Industrially, the necessity of specific names and charts to help structure economic activity in relation to black audience networks had been brought into sharp relief by the removal of *Billboard's* R&B chart, with labels like Atlantic using the new word to differentiate their product in the marketplace. The sources referred to in this section offer more detail on these various dimensions but for the present paper, the most salient issue is the way in which the emergence of soul contributed to a 'redr[awing of] lines of musical segregation' (Hamilton 2016, p. 177) because, broadly concurrent with the consecration of soul was the consecration of another new genre: rock. Combining the politicised anti-commercial instincts of the folk revival with the studio experimentations of bands like The Beach Boys, rock started to be legitimated as a new form of popular art, one that could transcend its origins as mere entertainment. New forms of criticism developed that valued this new genre for its lyrical and musical complexity, which were seen as an aesthetic 'development' of earlier genres such as blues, R&B and rock 'n' roll. And, as with most claims to art, it was white musicians such as The Beatles and Bob Dylan who were seen as leading the way.

We thus have a situation in which 'popular music in the 1960s [is] split according to genre and, more tacitly, race: on one hand is rock music, which is white; on the other, soul music, which is black' (Hamilton 2016, p. 6). Wald characterises the split between rock and soul as a distinction between 'listening music and dance music' (2009, p. 251), with rock musicians leading 'their audience off the dance floor, separating rock from its rhythmic and cultural roots' (Wald 2009, p. 246). Within this dichotomy, however, as well as essentialised understandings of race (with 'soul' commonly understood as an inherent or natural quality of African-Americans),

there are significant hierarchies of cultural value. Soul music was valued for its rhythm/danceability, emotional power and sometimes its political dimensions but also, paradoxically, interpreted by some as aesthetically 'limited' by its supposed virtues. Rock, on the other hand, was understood as an intellectual and aesthetic form of expression, valued for creative innovation and its 'progressive' tendencies. Furthermore, those seeking to vest rock with aesthetic significance were dismissive of the (often black) popular music that remained oriented towards the dancing needs of its audiences, criticising its commercialism and/or populism (most blatantly with the 'disco sucks' campaign in the late 1970s). These cultural ideologies had material consequences: with the exception of a few successful 'crossover' artists, African-American performers were increasingly marginalised from the (much more lucrative) popular music mainstream (Hamilton 2016, pp. 176–7) as the rock–soul division became 'increasingly difficult to overcome' (Wald 2009, p. 244) because 'for the baby-boomers, rock became, after 1965, white music made by white people' (George 1988, p. 93).

Which returns me to The Rolling Stones. 'Black music' (broadly defined) has obviously been fundamental to shaping The Rolling Stones' sound. However, the discussion in the body of this paper should hopefully make clear that for them 'black music' is not so much a mythologised and fossilised blues, mined as raw material to be developed by white aesthetic pioneers but, rather, a contemporaneous, living and breathing black music culture: rhythm and blues, and soul. The band's engagement with black music in the 1960s and beyond has been in the present tense. They absorbed (or were absorbed into) the aesthetic norms of the R&B/soul, making groove, audience engagement and emotional and physical release the touchstones of their style (simultaneously developing an image of a band defined by their live performances – with dancing audiences – rather than their records). They made a home in these norms rather than seeking to 'progress' beyond them and, significantly, remained connected to contemporary black music, and black musicians, beyond the early 1960s: Ike and Tina Turner and BB King, were support acts for The Stones' 1969 tour, with Stevie Wonder the support for their 1972 tour. By even this point in the rock/soul divergence, Hamilton notes how their 'ongoing proximity to black music and musicians increasingly left them as outliers in a rock-music landscape rapidly distancing itself from black people' (2016, p. 250), but this 'proximity' has continued throughout their whole career. As 'late' as 1988, critic Nelson George commented how 'Jagger has consistently refreshed his appeal by keeping in contact with developments in black music and incorporating them into his own music' (1988, p. 63). This has continued in subsequent decades.<sup>9</sup>

The band's adherence to the aesthetics of R&B/soul has also put them slightly at odds with the aesthetics of rock, however. They generally rejected the moves towards 'complexity' in the late 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>10</sup> It may not be a coincidence that they started branding themselves as 'the greatest rock *and roll* band in the world' [emphasis added] at precisely the time when rock was becoming consecrated as a

<sup>9</sup> It is perhaps easier to spot their continued engagement with black music and black musicians in their respective solo activities, with the opportunities afforded to play with more musicians, although it is also notable that the replacements for both Bill Wyman and Charlie Watts were black musicians (the latter of which had been a collaborator with Keith Richards for more than 30 years).

<sup>10</sup> 'I don't think that rock 'n' roll songwriters should worry about Art ... As far as I'm concerned, "Art" is just short for "Arthur"' (Keith Richards, in Flanagan 1987, p. 207).

new genre with new expectations of seriousness and seeking to distance itself from supposedly juvenile concerns. It would fit with repeated lamentations from Keith Richards in interviews that ‘the problem’ with rock is that it had lost the roll while Jagger has noted ‘I’ve never really liked what goes for white rock and roll ... I just can’t dance to it ... all the accents are in the wrong places’ (in Dalton and Farren 1980 p. 95). The Stones are thus in a slightly ambiguous relationship to ‘rock’. While they are viewed as a foundational act (and clearly have some broad counter-cultural cachet), they are not really ‘valued’ in the manner of ‘true originals’ like Dylan and The Beatles. There is certainly far less academic and critical work on The Stones than on those other acts. In particular, the band’s work past (for argument’s sake) 1975 is often critically dismissed as unoriginal and/or populist – the same kind of narratives often used to critique black popular music genres that are more oriented towards audiences/dancing.

## Conclusion

I have no desire to end this paper presenting The Stones as victims. For one thing, they have obviously been wildly commercially successful (although notably that success comes mainly from live performances rather than record sales). Their whiteness has given them access to rewards beyond the reach of most black performers. For another, they were active agents in the shaping the racial ideologies of popular music in the 1960s, even if they may not have intended the consequences. And certainly there are examples where the band’s relationship to race is, to put it kindly, complicated (Hamilton (2016) offers an excellent discussion of these complexities). My main purpose in this paper is simply to offer insight into some of the features that make The Rolling Stones musically distinctive and, hopefully, encourage more critical engagement with such an important and influential act. Doing so, however, necessarily brings into focus the racial structuring of popular music in the 1960s, which created exaggerated understandings of the musical differences between ‘rock’ and ‘soul’.

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