Syllabus for THE ROLLING STONES: The World’s Greatest Rock’n’Roll Band

Instructor: Richie Unterberger, richie@richieunterberger.com

Week One

I. The Roots of the Rolling Stones

A. In their late teens, Mick Jagger and Keith Richards meet in the London suburb of Dartford in the early 1960s. With friends they informally rehearse, play, and develop their enthusiasm for American blues, soul, and rock’n’roll.

B. In 1962 Mick and Keith meet Brian Jones, rebellious slightly older youth who has moved to London from Cheltenham, near the English-Welsh border. Jones is already an accomplished blues guitarist. The three of them start playing with various other musicians, and start calling themselves the Rolling Stones when they begin playing in public around mid-1962.

C. By the beginning of 1963, after various other musicians have gone in and out of the group, Mick, Keith, and Brian are playing with drummer Charlie Watts, bassist Bill Wyman, and pianist Ian Stewart. Mick, Keith, and Brian are also sharing a squalid apartment in London, where Mick goes to London School of Economics, and Keith and Brian remain unemployed. The Stones begin to build a devoted following in the few London-area clubs that will let them play.

Other themes discussed: the effect of post-World War II austerity on the Rolling Stones’ childhood and adolescence; the rabid devotion needed to find and learn about American blues for British teenagers in the late 1950s and early 1960s; the beginnings of a British blues-rock scene in the early ‘60s.

II. Rise to Stardom in the United Kingdom and United States

A. In spring 1963, the Rolling Stones get a deal with Decca Records
and engage Andrew Loog Oldham as manager. In the process, Ian Stewart is eased out of the group, though he remains with them as road manager and session keyboardist.

B. Throughout 1963, the Stones slowly make inroads into a national following, starting to play outside London, touring with the Everly Brothers and Bo Diddley, and issuing their first two singles. “I Wanna Be Your Man,” written for them by John Lennon and Paul McCartney, becomes their first substantial UK hit near the end of 1963.

C. “Not Fade Away” becomes their first big British hit in early 1964; their first album goes to #1 in the UK shortly after that; and the press plays up their bad boy image, positioning them as the more rebellious alternatives to the Beatles.

D. Becoming stars in the US as the Beatles begin the British Invasion in early 1964 is a struggle at first, though the Stones make their first US tour in June 1964 and start to build a following in this country.

E. But their international profile continues to rise in the second half of 1964 with two #1 hits in the UK (“It’s All Over Now” and “Little Red Rooster”); their first American top ten hit (“Time Is on My Side”); US network TV appearances; and closing The T.A.M.I. Show, the first major rock concert movie.

Other themes discussed: the huge influence of Chicago bluesmen and rockers like Chuck Berry, Bo Diddley, Jimmy Reed, Muddy Waters, and Howlin’ Wolf on their music; the overlooked role Brian Jones plays as early leader; Jagger and Richards’s first tentative songwriting efforts; hysteria at the Stones’ concerts, and the controversy and hostility it generates in the press.

**Week Two**

**I. Rise to International Superstardom**

A. In early 1965, the Rolling Stones have their first self-penned #1 UK single (and first self-penned US top ten single), “The Last Time.” Then “Satisfaction” rockets to the top of the American charts in the summer, immediately establishing them as the #2 group in the world
behind the Beatles.

B. Although Mick Jagger and Keith Richards have demonstrated they can write classic hit singles, it takes them longer to write enough material to fill up the Stones’ albums. But they consolidate their superstardom throughout the rest of 1965 with hit albums, another Transatlantic #1 single with “Get Off of My Cloud,” and constant international touring.

Other themes: Brian Jones is pushed out of the group’s creative leadership by the emergence of Jagger and Richards as songwriters; the band continues to generate controversy, three of them getting arrested in a widely publicized incident at a gas station; many other British groups follow the Stones’ approach of combining blues with rock.

II. 1966: Rolling Stones Established As Biggest Group in the World Besides the Beatles


B. With the Aftermath album, for the first time, Jagger and Richards write all of the songs, increasing the seriousness with which they’re taken as the Beatles’ top rivals.

C. The Stones’ summer 1966 US tour will be their last shows here until 1969, although no one knows this at the time. Behind-the-scenes tensions between the band and Brian Jones, and the band and manager Andrew Oldham, start to grow. Allen Klein is now acting as their business manager.

Other themes: Anita Pallenberg enters the Stones’ circle as Brian Jones’s girlfriend; Andrew Oldham’s role in producing as well as managing the Stones; accusations that the Stones imitate the Beatles on songs like “As Tears Go By” and “Paint It Black”; Brian Jones’s contributions to the group as a multi-instrumentalist; and the Stones’ immense influence on US garage bands.
Week Three

I. *Between the Buttons* and Court Cases

A. On *Between the Buttons*, the Stones get into slightly more pop-oriented material. At the same time, they record a huge hit single, “Ruby Tuesday”/“Let’s Spend the Night Together,” which tops the charts at the beginning of 1967.

B. Jagger, Richards, and a friend are busted on drug-related charges at Richard’s country home in February 1967. Much of their energy is sapped over the next few months in fighting to stay out of prison. Brian Jones gets busted a few months later and undergoes similar problems.

C. Jagger and Richards, and later Jones, manage to stay out of prison. But in the midst of all this, they sever ties with Andrew Oldham as manager producer.

Other themes: Anita Pallenberg leaves Jones for Richards; the British press’s role in getting the Stones in legal trouble, and extricating them from it.

II. *Their Satanic Majesties Request* and “Jumpin’ Jack Flash”

A. The Stones get into psychedelic rock with the “We Love You” single and *Their Satanic Majesties Request*, which gets a mixed reception, in part because some see it as ripping off the Beatles’ *Sgt. Pepper*.

B. Although Jagger and Richards are largely clear of legal troubles after avoiding prison in summer 1967, Brian Jones continues to struggle with them, and become increasingly incapable of contributing to the group.

C. The early 1968 single “Jumpin’ Jack Flash” is a big hit and proclaims a return to their blues roots, and the beginning of a long association with American producer Jimmy Miller.
III. Brian Jones Leaves, Mick Taylor In

A. In late 1968, the blues-based, acoustic-flavored *Beggars Banquet* album restores the Stones to critical favor. Some of the sessions for “Sympathy for the Devil” are filmed for Jean-Luc Godard’s movie *One Plus One* (later retitled *Sympathy for the Devil*). Mick Jagger makes his acting debut in *Performance*, also featuring Anita Pallenberg.

B. Concerned about Jones’s inability to function in the band, the Rolling Stones fire him in early June 1969. He is replaced by Mick Taylor, guitarist in John Mayall’s Bluesbreakers.

C. The *Let It Bleed* album is completed without Brian Jones, who drowns in his own swimming pool in early July 1969, less than a month after being fired.

Other themes: Ry Cooder’s role as session musician on *Let It Bleed*; Anita Pallenberg’s role in increasing tension within the band; the controversy over how Jones died.

Other themes: The psychological deterioration of Brian Jones; the interchange between the Beatles and the Stones in the psychedelic era; the group’s fleeting involvement with hippie culture; Marianne Faithfull enters the scene as Jagger’s girlfriend.

**Week Four**

I. A Return to Touring

A. The Stones give a free concert in London’s Hyde Park on July 5, 1969, just days after Brian Jones’s death. This is the first show played with Mick Taylor.

B. With a hit single (“Honky Tonk Women”) and album (*Let It Bleed*), the Stones tour the US for the first time since 1966 in the autumn (their first tour anywhere since spring 1967). Much of it’s filmed for the documentary *Gimme Shelter*.

C. At the end of the tour, the Stones give a free concert at the
Altamont Speedway at the edge of the Bay Area. It’s plagued by violence, and one audience member is fatally stabbed by a Hell’s Angel. Much of this is captured for the *Gimme Shelter* film, and the group ends the 1960s on a highly controversial note.

Other themes: the group’s growing dissatisfaction with Allen Klein; changes in how the band played live, and how audiences received them.

**II. Sticky Fingers and Exile in France**

A. The Rolling Stones sever their connection with Allen Klein, at a huge cost, giving him ownership of all of their 1960s recordings. They also cut their ties with Decca Records, making one last unreleased recording for them with an unprintable title.

B. *Sticky Fingers*, drawn from sessions dating back to 1969, is another huge hit, only slightly less blues-influenced than their previous two albums. It includes some of their most popular songs: “Brown Sugar,” “Wild Horses,” and “Bitch.”

C. Dogged by tax and financial problems, the Rolling Stones move to France in 1971, after giving a farewell tour of sorts in Britain. By now they have moved to Atlantic Records, and are issuing records on their own subsidiary label.

Other themes: Mick Taylor’s growing influence within the group; the mixed success of Mick Jagger’s acting career, with the belated release of the X-rated *Performance* and the seldom seen *Ned Kelly*.

**Week Five**

**I. Exile on Main Street**

A. In 1971 and 1972, the Stones record much of *Exile on Main Street* in Keith Richards’s villa in the South of France. This eventually turns into a double album, though the sessions are drawn out and fraught.

B. Having broken up with Marianne Faithfull, Mick Jagger marries Bianca Pérez-Mora Macias in a celebrity-studded wedding in France,
marking his entry into the international jet set.

C. The Stones complete *Exile on Main Street* in Los Angeles. When released in 1972, it’s a double album, and eventually gains critical acclaim as one of their most diverse efforts, though it’s not one of their highest sellers.

Other themes: Keith Richards’s increasing drug problems; the growing role of session men on Stones recordings, especially saxophonist Bobby Keys.

II. The End of the Mick Taylor Era

A. In summer 1972, the Rolling Stones tour the US with great success, and relatively little controversy. A documentary film of the tour with an unprintable title remains officially unreleased, though quite notorious for capturing backstage and airplane scenes of debauchery.

B. The Stones continue to tour the world through 1973, and record much of their next album, *Goats Head Soup*, in Jamaica.

C. *Goats Head Soup* and its follow-up, 1974’s *It’s Only Rock’n’Roll*, are the first Stones albums not to get broad critical acclaim, although they still sell well and have the big singles “Angie” and “It’s Only Rock’n’Roll.” Keith Richards’s drug, legal, and marital problems pile up, interfering with his artistic contributions to the group.

Other themes: the influence of reggae on the Rolling Stones; the diminishing role of producer Jimmy Miller; Bill Wyman starts a little-noticed solo career.

III. Mick Taylor Leaves; Ron Wood Joins

A. Mick Taylor leaves near the end of 1974, and the Rolling Stones hold auditions for his replacement while starting to record their next album. Jimmy Miller ends his stint as Stones producer.

B. Wayne Perkins, Harvey Mandel, and Ron Wood are among the guitarists auditioned, with several other possibilities mentioned,
including Jeff Beck and Eric Clapton. Ron Wood is chosen, in part because he’s British, though originally it’s announced as a temporary situation for a mid-’70s tour.

C. The album on which these guitarists play, *Black and Blue*, is more funk-influenced than anything the Stones have done before. The Stones tour the US in 1975, after which Ron Wood’s place in the band becomes permanent.

Other themes: The influence of British glam rock on the group’s music and image; the assumption of production duties by Mick Jagger and Keith Richards; the growing diaspora of the Stones as they settle in different countries and families.

**Week Six**

**The End of the 1970s, and the Rolling Stones’ Legacy**

I. *Some Girls* and Keith Richards’s Legal Problems

A. In 1978, *Some Girls* becomes the Rolling Stones’ biggest seller to date, drawing on punk and disco in addition to their trademark hard blues rock. Among the hits and popular radio standards on the album are “Some Girls,” “Miss You,” “Shattered,” “Respectable,” “When the Whip Comes Down,” and “Beast of Burden.”

B. Accused of trafficking heroin across the US-Canadian border, Keith Richards narrowly escapes prison after drawn-out legal proceedings.

C. Although more successful than ever as a recording and touring act, the Stones end the ‘70s in limbo, their recording and touring plans indefinite as Richards puts his life back together and marriages split up.

Other themes: Controversy over the Stones’ sexism, in both their lyrics and cover art; the Stones’ reaction to the onset of punk and new wave music; the growth of stadium tours that the Stones helped pioneer.
II. The Rolling Stones Post-‘70s

A. In the 1980s, while the Stones continue to be a huge concert draw, their records draw less and less attention and become less and less influential, despite occasional hits like “Start Me Up.”

B. Mick Jagger and Keith Richards start solo careers that are only moderately successful, and draw more press attention for the spats they generate between the pair than for the records and tours.

C. Bill Wyman leaves the band in the early 1990s, replaced by Darryl Jones. They continue to be a big stadium concert attraction to this day, although not many of their post-1980 studio recordings are considered notable.

Other themes: Archival projects: the 25 X 5, Stones in Exile, and Crossfire Hurricane documentaries; the According to the Rolling Stones book and Keith Richards’s Life autobiography.