

“(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction” by the Rolling Stones (1965)

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Essay by Dan LeRoy (guest post)*



The Rolling Stones

Not long before his untimely death in February 2020, guitarist Andy Gill of the British post-punk band Gang of Four was reminiscing about his love of The Rolling Stones’ “Satisfaction.”

“That *riff!*” Gill enthused. “It was *perfect*. Every morning when I went to school, and every night when I came home, I marched along to it.”¹

Former Gang of Four singer Jon King had innumerable disputes with his old bandmate. But on the subject of “Satisfaction,” the two had long ago reached a satisfying equilibrium.

“I doubt there’s many rock music fans who don’t revere ‘Satisfaction,’” King observed. His description of the song’s attributes was admirably succinct: “Killer riff, spare, focused with intense and deep lyrics about alienation in a new consumer culture.”

That two post-punk legends like Gill and King would revere “Satisfaction” is hardly a surprise. The divide between old-guard bands like the Stones and the then-new wave in Britain was never as pronounced as it first appeared.

But what made the song singular in its time is, paradoxically, what also makes it universal, today and forevermore. More than any other song of its era, it embodies discontent and alienation--and not just the sort beginning to surface in the mid-Sixties.

¹ After Gill’s death, an interview with the journalist and author Dan Epstein surfaced in “Flood” magazine. In that previously-unpublished conversation from a few years prior, Gill revealed that he had auditioned for Jagger’s band in the mid-Eighties, and that in rehearsal, he upstaged an outraged Jeff Beck by talking the guitar solo in “Miss You.”

A number one single on both sides of the Atlantic in the summer of 1965, it captured the “rumbling of rebellion,” as guitarist Keith Richards put it, and became the Stones’ signature hit for nearly half a decade, until “Jumpin’ Jack Flash” arrived to supplant it as the decade changed.

The circumstances of the song's creation are etched permanently into the cave walls of rock history. Richards has often told the tale of how the song’s iconic riff came to him as if by magic. “I wrote ‘Satisfaction’ in my sleep,” he recalled in his autobiography, “Life.” “I had no idea I’d written it.”

In fact, Richards described how he awoke one morning in his Carlton Hill flat and listened, amazed, to the idea he couldn’t recall recording the night before. “Then I pushed rewind and there was ‘Satisfaction’”--along with “forty minutes of me snoring.”

The riff, originally played on the acoustic guitar by Richards’ bedside, would take shape when run through a fuzzbox (even though acoustic guitar plays an important space-filling function on the 45). That “one little foot pedal,” a Gibson FZ-1 Fuzz-Tone, represented one of only two times Richards claims to have sought help from an effects box. But in this instance, it helped Richards simulate the sound in his head: that of a horn section, which the Stones would not use on disc for another year.²

Lyrically, Richards had but a single line, but it was the crucial one: “I can't get no satisfaction.” It was likely drawn, points out author Bill Janovitz, from Chuck Berry’s “30 Days,” in which the “satisfaction” mentioned relates to the narrator being satisfied by a judge (a concept with which Berry was intimately acquainted).³ Then it was up to Jagger, who, according to his writing partner, “would do all the hard work of filling it in and making it interesting.”

In this case, working poolside at a Clearwater, Florida, hotel,⁴ Jagger came through at the highest level. The song was debuted to less-than-impressive results at Chicago’s Chess Studios, but producer Andrew Loog Oldham recognized its groundbreaking potential, and gave it a second chance rare in the annals of hit-or-miss Sixties pop. Even today, listeners like Jon King marvel that “Jagger could come up with this totally original perspective” not long after Oldham had locked him and Richards in a Denmark Street rehearsal room and forced them to write their own material,⁵ turning an R&B cover band into one of the most storied songwriting duos in rock history. “What a pivot!” King observed.

It was, indeed. So much has been written about the revolutionary qualities of Sixties pop music generally, and Sixties British Invasion bands specifically, that it becomes difficult to credit

² On the 1966 Top Ten single “Have You Seen Your Mother, Baby, Standing in the Shadow?”

³ Berry had been released from prison in 1963 after being convicted of violating the Mann Act for transporting a minor across state lines. He would periodically face judges throughout his career, most recently in 2000, when a judge dismissed a lawsuit by his former pianist, Johnnie Johnson, who claimed he had co-written more than 50 of Berry’s songs.

⁴ Where he was allegedly inspired by a teenage girl named Ginny French, according to a 2015 piece in “The Paris Review.”

⁵ Where they wrote, according to Richards, “As Tears Go By.” Jagger disputes that they were actually locked in the room, and remembers “It Should Be You” as among the first fruits of Oldham’s demand.

anyone who uses the term. But as Jon Savage pointed out in his authorized biography of The Kinks, by 1965, pop music was not only advancing by leaps and bounds in its audio innovation, but in its lyrical concerns as well. In Britain, especially, it had acquired “a sarcastic cutting edge,” Savage wrote, “which, muddled by ears waxed with nostalgia, we no longer hear.”

John Lennon and The Kinks’ Ray Davies, both famously uncomfortable in their own skins, would spend 1965 dealing with this newly-expressible malaise in different ways. Lennon, believing himself trapped in what he would later describe as his “Fat Elvis” phase, made himself the target. This occurred most famously when he aired his unhappiness, like Poe’s purloined letter, right under the noses of the public on The Beatles’ “Help,” confessing that “every now and then, I feel so insecure.” Davies, meanwhile, plunged the satirical knife into the backs of others: an upper class snob in “A Well-Respected Man” and a Swinging London trendsetter in “Dedicated Follower of Fashion.”

But neither man would strike the chord of universal discontent that Jagger and Richards sounded like a gong on “Satisfaction.” As Savage pointed out, with “Satisfaction,” the Stones were “set on a course of records...that not only satirized the ‘classless’ *milieu* in which the aristocracy of pop groups now found itself, but also saw through the promises and articulated the futility and selfishness that lay behind this new, golden dream.”

Jagger’s lyric, which referenced the growing power of advertising and the growing awareness of its innate duplicity, as well the mixed messages that inevitably accrue (“He can’t be a man,” Jagger observes of a pitchman for spotless white shirts, “‘cause he doesn’t smoke the same cigarettes as me”), is also a partially coded paean to sexual frustration. Janovitz quoted a 1966 interview with Jagger, in which the singer bragged that “the dirtiest line...they don’t understand, see?” (That is the one that suggests the narrator is not “getting any” satisfaction due to it being that time of the month.) Janovitz went on to say that Jagger’s “unfocused angst” still “spoke more about what was going on (or not going on) below the waist than above the neck.” It’s impossible not to read the song that way in light of the narrator’s complaint about getting no “girl reaction,” and about what we have long been told about the changing mores of the Baby Boomers on the eve of hippiedom, free love, and increasing access to The Pill.

Yet the greatness of “Satisfaction” is that it can be, and probably is, even more. Its dilemma is not of insecurity, nor of the battle between castes, nor of the ephemeral nature of fashion. And the time of its creation notwithstanding, it is not only about the dissatisfactions of pop’s new aristocracy. “Satisfaction” instead goes to the core of the human condition, illuminating darkly the thing that every human being has experienced, and that every human being always will: the perpetual gap between the perfect world and this one.

In Paul’s New Testament letter to the Philippians, he offered a possible solution: “I have learned in whatever state I am,” he wrote, “to be content.” Paul tried, and he tried and he tried, to get some satisfaction. Finally he apparently got it, though we are given to understand that he, like every other human, still struggled with doubts, even with the help of the divine.

In some other universe, “Satisfaction” could therefore have been a gospel song. But in the Stones’ hands, it isn’t: despite the proto-Motown groove⁶ underneath that monumental riff, “Satisfaction” is purely secular, and perpetually frustrated. The song is a closed circuit, admitting no solution, neither from above nor below. The only answer is shared anger, shaking it out to the relentless thump of Charlie Watts⁷, and knowing at least that others are as miserable as you.⁸ It’s no wonder the punks revered it.

And it’s no wonder that even those who don’t revere it understand how large it looms over the odd little edifice of popular music, especially as that structure ages and its parts can no longer be replaced. In 2004, “Rolling Stone” magazine named “Satisfaction” the second-greatest song of all time⁹; the Stones themselves have kept it in their ever-changing set list for every tour since its release. In 2020, as they head for the road once again, staring down their eighties, it will undoubtedly be there again.

“It was the song that really made The Rolling Stones,” Sir Mick Jagger observed in 1995. Until heaven and earth are once again reconciled--here, there, or everywhere--it will make all of us rock, and ruminate, as long as music is played.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

⁶ Lifted at least in part from the drum rhythm of Stevie Wonder’s joyous “Uptight.”

⁷ Assisted by tambourine from Jack Nitzsche, who also played piano.

⁸ Devo’s even more claustrophobic 1978 cover of the song is therefore even more honest to its intent. The offbeat snare hits derail the forward momentum that at least promises some release, and, until the very end of the song, the guitar riff is compressed into stabs of static, staccato funk. It might have been hard to imagine that Jagger and Richards couldn’t find at least a little satisfaction, but it was quite easy to believe that Devo could not, and never would.

⁹ It was beaten out by another song from 1965, Bob Dylan’s “Like a Rolling Stone,” which has neither its memorable riff nor its universal sentiment.