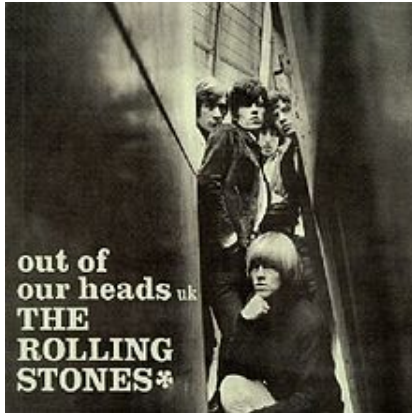


# “(I Can’t Get No) Satisfaction”—The Rolling Stones (1965)

Added to the National Registry: 2006

Essay by Cary O’Dell



*Original album*



*Original label*



*Keith Richards*

“Satisfaction” was the Rolling Stones’ first number one American hit. To many, it is the quintessential rock song with its mix of fractured grammar (“can’t get no”), its sense of rebellion and disillusionment, its anti-commercialism stance and, of course, its driving guitar riff.

Keith Richards wrote the music and the song’s most important lyric. He has long claimed that the song’s signature riff came to him in his sleep and that he got up, played it into a tape recorder (onto a Philips cassette, to be exact) and then returned to bed. Luckily, he remembered to press “play-record” in the middle of the night or else he would have forgotten it entirely. Groggily the next morning, he played it back and decided he had something good.

Musicologists have often noted similarities between “Satisfaction” and Martha and the Vandellas’s “Dancing in The Street” (also on the National Recording Registry). Richards might have had that 1964 song echoing in his head the night that “Satisfaction” came to him. Speculation has also arisen over the song’s signature line; Chuck Berry’s earlier hit “30 Days” contains the lyric “I can’t get no satisfaction from the judge.”

Regardless, after Richards provided the riff and the “can’t get no,” Rolling Stones bandmate and lead singer Mick Jagger wrote the remaining words while one day sitting by the pool in Clearwater, Florida. The group would record the finished song four days later.

“Satisfaction” would first be recording by the Stones in a studio in Chicago. But, to the ear of the group’s manager, Andrew Loog Oldham, the final product sounded too Dylan, too country, for a group hoping to dominate rock. Two days later, in LA, the Stones re-recorded the song. The second “Satisfaction” would be the Stones’ first to incorporate use of a Maestro FuzzTone pedal. The FuzzTone pedal is a device used for compressing sound waves into a “fuzzy” or distorted effect. With the pedal in use, the Stones launched into a more aggressive treatment of the song. Keith Richards later told “Blender” magazine, “Charlie [Watts] put down a different tempo and with the addition of the fuzzbox on my guitar, which takes off all the treble, we achieved a very interesting sound.” (The addition of the “fuzz” was fortunate; its effect allowed for the song to stand out more when played on the then listening norm of low-fi AM car radio.)

Even after this second recording was finished, surprisingly, none of the Stones thought too highly of it and were surprised when Oldham put it out as a single from the group’s “Out of Our Heads” album.

As mentioned, “Satisfaction” would soon become the biggest hit of the Rolling Stones’ then young career. (They had previously been in the top 10 two other times.) “Satisfaction” became THE song of the summer of ’65, peaking in June of that year.

That the song arrived smack dab in the middle of the 1960’s should not go unnoticed. While its beat makes you want to dance and pound your air drums, its lyrics encompass a rash of slowly festering youthful frustrations. Though the word “satisfaction” has a clear sexual connotation--as it does here in the song--the term as it is also used denotes rampant dissatisfaction with a variety of other non-physical factors. In the first verse Jagger lashes out at “that man” (standing in for “the man”?) who “comes on the radio” and utters “some useless information.” Here the song takes on not only the media elite who have commandeered the public airwaves but also modern day information overload, the tower of babble that already clogged mass communication even before the advent of Facebook and Twitter.

After a repeat of the song’s rousing chorus, in the next verse, Jagger is still taking on matters of mass communication. Television this time (pre-figuring the screed of “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised” by Gil Scott Heron). There is a reappearance of “that man” who is, now, on TV and is “on to tell me/how white my shirt can be.” Here the media messages have become even more banal, having degraded from at least some type of “information” to crass commercialism i.e. an ad for laundry detergent. But the song’s singer is having none of it and dismisses the man and all he represents quickly and out of hand. His reasons for the rejection, spelled out in the next lyric, though are startlingly simplistic. It’s just so much Marlboro Man macho posturing: “But he can’t be a man ‘cause he doesn’t smoke/the same cigarettes as me.”

The specter of sex returns in the song’s final verse in the form of an autobiographical rant about a modern day rock band. Its members are on an endless, exhaustive global tour (“Ridin’ round the world”) mindlessly going through the motions of rock ‘n’ roll superstardom (“Doin’ this and signin’ that”). Their existence in some ways is as dull and vapid as that of the anonymous radio and TV salesman mentioned earlier and it can’t even be augmented with a hotel room tryst with a groupie or girlfriend. The singer sings “I can’t get no girl reaction” as well as “And I’m tryin’ to make some girl.” (The latter was a line originally censored when the Stones performed “Satisfaction” on “The Ed Sullivan Show” in ’66.) Ultimately, here again, no “satisfaction” is available.

For the Stones themselves, “Satisfaction” very much reflected their own feelings at the time in terms of touring, over zealous record companies and the rampant commercialization of their music by the same.

Of course, for most listeners, what most resonates about “Satisfaction” is its chorus. Its “I can’t get no!” is a arena-ready chant, primed to be shouted by fevered concert goers who are in love with the music and also ready to vent their own dissatisfaction in terms of money, jobs, and disrespect from parents and/or the aforementioned “man.”

After the Stones’s massive success with the song, cover versions were inevitable. In 1966, Otis Redding recorded it. Unable to make out all the lyrics to the original however, Redding later admitted to often making up his own words. Unlike the guitar-based version that the Stones put out, Redding brought in a full horn section for the song’s signature riff. Preferring this approach, Keith Richards later admitted that the Stones would often copy Redding’s style in their later reprisals of their massive hit.

One of the most inventive treatments of “Satisfaction” arrived in 1977 via new wave quintet Devo. Their jerky, slightly robotic delivery and techno take on “Satisfaction,” produced by Brian Eno, reimagined the song for the Atari and dot-matrix generation. And though their sound

was a (supposed) harbinger of the future, the song's message of not getting what you want or need once again connected with a new generation of rock enthusiasts.

*Cary O'Dell is with the Motion Picture, Broadcast and Recorded Sound division of the Library of Congress. He is the author of the books "June Cleaver Was a Feminist!" (2014) and "Women Pioneers in Television" (1997). He also served as assistant editor of "The Concise Encyclopedia of American Radio" (2009) and "The Biographical Encyclopedia of American Radio" (2010).*