

COUNTING DOWN

THE 
ROLLING
STONES

THEIR | 100

FINEST | SONGS

JIM BEVIGLIA

**COUNTING DOWN
THE ROLLING STONES**

Counting Down

Counting Down is a unique series of titles designed to select the best songs or musical works from major performance artists and composers in an age of de-sign-your-own playlists. Contributors offer readers the reasons why some works stand out from others. It is the ideal companion for music lovers.

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Counting Down The Rolling Stones: Their 100 Finest Songs by Jim Beviglia, 2016

**COUNTING DOWN
THE ROLLING STONES**

Their 100 Finest Songs

Jim Beviglia

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To everyone in my hometown of Old Forge, PA:
“Let’s drink to the salt of the earth.”

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I've included in the bibliography the books that helped me most in my research. But I would be remiss if I didn't mention the website *Time Is on Our Side* (timeisonourside.com), an excellent destination for those seeking information on The Stones and their songs. Run by a gentleman named Ian McPherson, this site unfailingly pushed me in the right direction in terms of quotes about the songs from the band themselves. Even now that the book is finished, I find myself heading back time and again to the site.

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of my love for her. So I'll just say that my three favorite words in the English language are "my wife, Marie" and leave it at that.

INTRODUCTION

To do a book like this, you have to have the right subject. In other words, not every artist is going to be worthy enough to warrant an in-depth look at his or her top one hundred songs. First of all, some artists just haven't been around long enough to compile a hundred songs that are good enough to scrutinize. Then there are those artists who have been around forever but whose work just doesn't have the consistent levels of quality that would make you want to dive deep into their catalogs.

My previous two subjects, Bob Dylan and Bruce Springsteen, cleared these bars pretty easily, and, when it became apparent that I was going to get the opportunity to do a third, The Rolling Stones were an easy choice. After all, how many other bands have been recording for more than fifty years? And, of those bands who have even approached that milestone, have there been any that have reached the levels of popularity, impact, and artistic brilliance that The Stones have maintained?

Speaking of Springsteen, an anecdote he once gave probably comes as close to describing the appeal of The Rolling Stones better than I possibly could. He was talking about growing up as a music fan and the bands to whom he was drawn as a kid growing up in New Jersey. He related how The Beatles, as he saw them, were like this unattainable ideal, so perfect in the way they looked, sang, and played. There wasn't even an inkling on his part that he could possibly be like them. As much as he loved their music, he couldn't ever hope to emulate it.

When he saw The Rolling Stones, however, he said something to the effect of "I can do that." They looked like they had crawled in from off

the streets, played raucously, and sang with a sneer. This was something to which he could aspire. This was attainable.

Of course, the trick is that The Stones only made it seem that way, even as they wrote and performed music deeper, richer, and realer than just about every one of their peers. They developed a kind of innate chemistry that made their records far more than the sum of their parts. And, as time passed, they reflected the various eras that their career spanned without ever stepping up and overtly trying to be spokesmen, as others did; after all, any such move would have smacked too much of responsibility and tarnished their irreverent image.

The Stones have been the unofficial face of rock and roll for a long time now, and even as that face has wrinkled, the band still delivers the goods. That's what makes them such a natural subject for a project like this.

Before we get started, some ground rules. As in my previous books, these rankings are based on nothing other than my assessment of the songs' quality levels. I did not consider chart position, cultural impact, or other critical assessments connected to the songs in any way. It's a subjective process, of course, but I try to remove any significance the songs might have to my own life from consideration as well, so I'm trying to be objectively subjective, if that makes sense.

Only officially released recordings were considered; no bootlegs available on the street or on the Web but not given an official release by the band were included. And, as with my previous books, no cover songs have been considered. That's a big loss with The Stones, who have done some smoking homages to their blues and R & B forebears over the years, but those are the rules, folks. All songs that made the countdown were songs written, at least in part, by one or multiple members of the band.

One other note: The Stones presented a bit of a problem in terms of the release information that is included in parentheses right after each entry. First of all, their US and UK albums often featured different song rosters in the 1960s, so I tried to mention whichever country's version of the album contains a particular song when that song only appears on the album in only one of the two countries. In addition, The Stones often released nonalbum singles that would eventually appear on various compilation albums only but were not on any studio album in any country. In these instances, I tried to go with the first compilation on which the songs

appeared. Please note that in these cases, the year that is listed usually pertains to the year the compilation was released and not the year the song was released as a single if the two differ.

Unlike my previous two subjects, this is the first time I've written about the entire catalog of The Stones. As a result, I feel like I've learned a lot in the writing of this book, not just about the band but about the music scene they often dominated and the times in which they performed as well. I've also had a blast digging deep into one of rock and roll's most majestic song catalogs. I can only hope that you readers, whether you're new to the band or know them inside and out, come away feeling similarly informed and entertained when you've turned this book's final page.

THE COUNTDOWN

100. “One Hit (to the Body)” (from *Dirty Work*, 1986)

We begin our journey, somewhat ironically, at perhaps the low point in the recording career of The Rolling Stones. From the album cover to the music contained therein to the relationships of the band as they recorded the thing, 1986’s *Dirty Work* was a giant mess in every possible manner.

At the time, it received pretty favorable reviews from some reputable magazines and critics, as the band embraced the sounds of that time period with seeming fearlessness. Yet closer inspection reveals a bunch of guys not so much boldly going in a modern direction but rather trying to hop aboard a bandwagon not quite worthy of them in the first place. The mid-1980s, a time when the decade’s more synthetic production tics ran amok, tripped up a lot of rock’s heritage artists, with The Stones being perhaps the foremost example.

Of course, none of that would have mattered had The Stones produced the songs to compensate for any indecisiveness in the recording and mixing stages. With Mick Jagger pretty much a nonfactor for large portions of the recording process as he concentrated on his solo album *She’s the Boss*, those songs simply weren’t available on *Dirty Work*, as evidenced by the fact that guitarist Ronnie Wood received four partial songwriting credits on the album, which is four more than he usually received. In what seems like a misguided attempt to hide the lack of material, Jagger screamed out most of the songs in a voice that borders on grating.

The blame can pretty much be spread around here, and it all adds up to what many consider the weakest album in the band’s canon and one

whose bad vibes came as close as anything to breaking the band up once and for all. Yet even as they bottomed out, The Stones still had at least one knockout song in them on the album (actually two, counting “Harlem Shuffle,” which was a cover and therefore not included in this list). “One Hit (to the Body)” manages to (mostly) sidestep the production issues that dog the rest of the album and come on with the force and menace that’s emblematic of the band at their hardest-rocking best.

Wood’s work stands out here, particularly in the memorable opening moments as his tense acoustic work dovetails with Charlie Watts’s nervous cymbals to balance out the crushing electric chords. That leads nicely into the main groove, which stays nimble enough, even with all the crunching guitar work threatening to bludgeon it.

It’s also the finest vocal effort on the album from Jagger, one that pulls back from the hectoring stuff he was doing in other songs on *Dirty Work* and manages to combine brute-force singing with some genuine connection to the lyrics. The song uses a fighting metaphor to depict the violent force with which a memorable woman jars the narrator every time she comes in and out of his life.

While that’s not the most novel idea for a song (even within The Stones catalog, it had been done before), there is just enough quirkiness in the lines to get it past. Jagger sings, “You unzipped the dark,” suggesting that this woman’s sexual prowess is enough to metaphysically seduce even the night itself. She eventually becomes an addiction that the narrator is either unable or unwilling to shake: “I can’t clean you out of my veins.”

Jagger gets some help from a chorus of backing vocalists that include soul legend Bobby Womack and future Mrs. Springsteen Patti Scialfa. And, since guest stars were the order of the day during the *Dirty Work* sessions, Jimmy Page’s appearance on lead guitar on the break is apropos. His wild squalling solo is the kind of showy centerpiece that The Stones hadn’t really employed since the days of Mick Taylor, but it works well in the context of this song, which is over the top in an enjoyable way as a whole.

The song ends with Jagger intoning over and over, “So help me God.” The case had been made well enough by the music and the lyrics by that point that the narrator really didn’t need to swear on it for us to believe him, but it’s still one of those charismatic, spontaneous things Jagger tends to do during a song that adds a bit of value.

In the song's video, directed by 1980s video maven Russell Mulcahy, Jagger and Keith Richards are seen doing mock battle while performing. There wasn't a lot of method acting that needed to be done, since they were pretty much at each other's throats then, leading to the epic (for them) three-year hiatus before The Stones reunited with *Steel Wheels* in 1989. "One Hit (to the Body)" probably isn't good enough to make up for all of the damage that *Dirty Work* did, but it's still a high point in a low period.

99. "Torn and Frayed" (from *Exile on Main St.*, 1972)

The good thing about a double album is that it allows you the space for just about any kind of stylistic detour you might want to take. *Exile on Main St.* left enough room for The Stones to include "Torn and Frayed," a wistful bit of shuffling country rock that wouldn't have sounded out of place on an Allman Brothers record.

After Keith Richards's contemplative acoustic intro, the rest of the band kicks in all at once to accompany Mick Jagger and Richards harmonizing on the line "Hey, let him follow you down." That moment immediately sets a sympathetic tone, imploring the listener to be accepting and forgiving of the person about to be described. This tone of good-natured abiding and understanding is sustained throughout the entirety of the track.

But who is it exactly that we're supposed to allow into our lives? Jagger paints a portrait, heavy with telling details, of a kind of lovable rake who can't get out of his own way long enough to solve his problems. "Just a deadbeat right off the street / Bound to follow you down" is how Jagger initially describes him, suggesting that this poor soul can't help but end up in the gutters and ditches of life, which is why it's all the more important that he has some company to soften the blow.

Once Jagger puts him in the midst of the rock-and-roll life, with its "barrooms and smelly bordellos / And dressing rooms filled with parasites," it becomes clear that he's drawing on his own experience for this character sketch. While he specifically mentions the guitar player, the whole band is described as being nervous and unsure onstage. It wasn't the first time Jagger would make such references; on 1968's "Jigsaw Puzzle" he gave a blow-by-blow rundown of each individual band member's peccadilloes and problems. Such a presentation is at odds with the