

A Writing Stone: Chapter and Verse

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LIFE by Keith Richards with James Fox, Illustrated. 564 pages. Little, Brown & Company. \$29.99.

For legions of [Rolling Stones](#) fans, Keith Richards is not only the heart and soul of the world's greatest rock 'n' roll band, he's also the very avatar of rebellion: the desperado, the buccaneer, the poète maudit, the soul survivor and main offender, the torn and frayed outlaw, and the coolest dude on the planet, named both No. 1 on the rock stars most-likely-to-die list and the one life form (besides the cockroach) capable of surviving nuclear war.

Halfway through his electrifying new memoir, "Life," [Keith Richards](#) writes about the consequences of fame: the nearly complete loss of privacy and the weirdness of being mythologized by fans as a sort of folk-hero renegade.

"I can't untie the threads of how much I played up to the part that was written for me," he says. "I mean the skull ring and the broken tooth and the kohl. Is it half and half? I think in a way your persona, your image, as it used to be known, is like a ball and chain. People think I'm still a goddamn junkie. It's 30 years since I gave up the dope! Image is like a long shadow. Even when the sun goes down, you can see it."

By turns earnest and wicked, sweet and sarcastic and unsparing, Mr. Richards, now 66, writes with uncommon candor and immediacy. He's decided that he's going to tell it as he remembers it, and helped along with notebooks, letters and a diary he once kept, he remembers almost everything. He gives us an indelible, time-capsule feel for the madness that was life on the road with [the Stones](#) in the years before and after Altamont; harrowing accounts of his many close shaves and narrow escapes (from the police, prison time, drug hell); and a heap of sharp-edged snapshots of friends and colleagues — most notably, his longtime musical partner and sometime bête noire, [Mick Jagger](#).

But "Life" — which was written with the veteran journalist James Fox — is way more than a revealing showbiz memoir. It is also a high-def, high-velocity portrait of the era when rock 'n' roll came of age, a raw report from deep inside the counterculture maelstrom of how that music swept like a tsunami over Britain and

the United States. It's an eye-opening all-nighter in the studio with a master craftsman disclosing the alchemical secrets of his art. And it's the intimate and moving story of one man's long strange trip over the decades, told in dead-on, visceral prose without any of the pretense, caution or self-consciousness that usually attend great artists sitting for their self-portraits.

Die-hard Stones fans, of course, will pore over the detailed discussions of how songs like "Ruby Tuesday" and "Gimme Shelter" came to be written, the birthing process of some of Mr. Richards's classic guitar riffs and the collaborative dynamic between him and Mr. Jagger. But the book will also dazzle the uninitiated, who thought they had only a casual interest in the Stones or who thought of Mr. Richards, vaguely, as a rock god who was mad, bad and dangerous to know. The book is that compelling and eloquently told.

Mr. Richards's prose is like his guitar playing: intense, elemental, utterly distinctive and achingly, emotionally direct. Just as the Stones perfected a signature sound that could accommodate everything from ferocious Dionysian anthems to melancholy ballads about love and time and loss, so Mr. Richards has found a voice in these pages — a kind of rich, primal Keith-Speak — that enables him to dispense funny, streetwise observations, tender family reminiscences, casually profane yarns and wry literary allusions with both heart-felt sincerity and bad-boy charm.

Songwriting, Mr. Richards says, long ago turned him into an observer always on the lookout for "ammo," and he does a highly tactile job here of conjuring the past, whether he's describing his post-World War II childhood in the little town of Dartford (memorialized here with affectionate, Dickensian detail); the smoky blues clubs that he and his friends haunted in their early days in London; or the wretched excess of the Stones' later tours, when they had "become a pirate nation," booking entire floors in hotels and "moving on a huge scale under our own flag, with lawyers, clowns, attendants."

In these pages we see Keith through the scrolling chapters of his life. There's the choir boy and [Boy Scout](#), who was bullied by schoolmates and kept a pet mouse named Gladys. The former art student, dedicating himself like a monk to mastering the blues:

"You were supposed to spend all your waking hours studying [Jimmy Reed](#), [Muddy](#)

[Waters](#), Little Walter, [Howlin' Wolf](#), Robert Johnson. That was your gig. Every other moment taken away from it was a sin.”

And later, the rock star, known for his pirate swagger, who actually remains something of a shy romantic with women, worrying about finding “the right line, or one that hadn’t been used before.”

“I just never had that thing with women,” he writes. “I would do it silently. Very Charlie Chaplin. The scratch, the look, the body language. Get my drift? Now it’s up to you. ‘Hey, baby’ is just not my come-on.”

Mr. Richards communicates the boyish astonishment he felt when the Stones found their dream of being missionaries for the American music they loved suddenly giving way to pop fame of their own, and their hand-to-mouth existence in a London tenement (financed in part by redeeming empty beer bottles stolen from parties) metamorphosed into full-on stardom, complete with rioting teenagers and screaming girls. He conveys the exhausting rigors of life on the road, even as he captures the absurdities of what was rock star life back in the day: the pharmaceutical cocaine, the impulsive jaunts abroad (“let’s jump in the Bentley and go to Morocco”), the spectacle of the police perched in the trees outside his home.

Of the years of living dangerously, when he was zonked out on heroin, Mr. Richards recalls that he slept with a gun under his pillow; turned his 7-year-old son, Marlon, into his minder on the road; and forced all his band mates to live on “Keith Time,” in which 2 p.m. recording sessions had a way of becoming 1 a.m. dates the following day. He writes candidly about how everything began to revolve around “organizing the next fix” — elaborate stratagems, which at one point included buying doctor and nurse play sets at [FAO Schwarz](#) — and the difficulties of getting and staying clean.

Why did he become an addict in the first place? “I never particularly liked being that famous,” Mr. Richards says. “I could face people easier on the stuff, but I could do that with booze too. It isn’t really the whole answer. I also felt I was doing it not to be a ‘pop star.’ There was something I didn’t really like about that end of what I was doing, the blah blah blah. That was very difficult to handle, and I could handle it better on smack. Mick chose flattery, which is very like junk — a departure from reality. I chose junk.”

During the worst of his years on heroin, Mr. Richards writes, Mr. Jagger stepped up

and dealt with the day-to-day business of running the band but was reluctant to relinquish his increased control once Mr. Richards returned to action. He writes that Mr. Jagger had begun to treat the rest of the band as “basically hirelings,” and he describes the sense of hurt and betrayal he felt when he read in an English newspaper that Mr. Jagger, then intent on a solo career, had described the Stones as a “millstone” around his neck.

Mr. Richards also mocks Mr. Jagger (whom he jokingly began referring to as “Brenda” or “Her Majesty”) as a social climber and swollen head, and says that Mr. Jagger “started second-guessing his own talent” and chasing after musical trends. But while this book’s passages about Mr. Jagger have made lots of headlines, especially in England, they are not all that different from the volleys of accusations the two have exchanged over the years, and Mr. Richards adds that deep down he and Mr. Jagger remain brothers.

It’s really less a case of “North and South Korea,” he says, than “East and West Berlin.”

Mr. Richards’s verbal photos of other colleagues and acquaintances are razor-sharp as well. He describes [Hugh Hefner](#) as “a nut” and “a pimp,” and [Truman Capote](#) as a “snooty” whiner. He writes that [Chuck Berry](#) was his “numero uno hero” (from whom Richards says he stole “every lick he ever played”) but “a big disappointment” when he met him in person. In another chapter he writes that success turned his former band mate Brian Jones “into this sort of freak, devouring celebs and fame and attention.”

In the course of “Life,” Mr. Richards discusses his clashes with the police and his much-chronicled court appearances, as well as all the other headlines generated by the tabloids over the years. But the most insistent melodic line in this volume has nothing to do with drugs or celebrity or scandal. It has to do with the spongelike love of music Mr. Richards inherited from his grandfather and his own sense of musical history, his reverence for the blues and R&B masters he has studied his entire life (“the tablets of stone”), and his determination to pass his own knowledge on down the line.

One of this galvanic book’s many achievements is that Mr. Richards has found a way to channel to the reader his own avidity, his own deep soul hunger for music

and to make us feel the connections that bind one generation of musicians to another. Along the way he even manages to communicate something of that magic, electromagnetic experience of playing on stage with his mates, be it in a little club or a huge stadium.

“There’s a certain moment when you realize that you’ve actually just left the planet for a bit and that nobody can touch you,” Mr. Richards writes. “You’re elevated because you’re with a bunch of guys that want to do the same thing as you. And when it works, baby, you’ve got wings.” You are, he says, “flying without a license.”