

The Stones and Brian Jones: A talented rock musician who shone brightly but briefly

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Directed by Nick Broomfield; written by Nick Broomfield and Marc Hoferlin

A mention of the Rolling Stones is likely to call to mind Mick Jagger and Keith Richards, the group's main songwriters and most famous members. Younger people are not likely to think of Brian Jones, the band's founder and first lead guitarist. To many who were not around when the Stones first emerged, Jones's name may be unfamiliar. Yet throughout the 1960s, he had a major influence on the musical style and public image of what became one of the most influential bands ever. *The Stones and Brian Jones* (2023) is a thoughtful and detailed documentary that highlights Jones's contributions to the band and attempts to shed light on his brief and ultimately tragic life.

Veteran documentarian Nick Broomfield (*Kurt and Courtney*, *Battle for Haditha*) clearly put an admirable amount of research into the movie. He presents us with letters between Jones and his parents, Jones's responses to fan mail, the Stones' TV performances and even brief footage of Jones playing clarinet in school. Broomfield not only included archival interviews with the band and its circle, but also conducted his own interviews with original Stones bassist Bill Wyman, Jones's girlfriends and contemporaries such as singer Marianne Faithfull and ex-Beatle Paul McCartney. Wyman repeatedly and enthusiastically points out how Jones's contributions made the band's songs distinctive, colorful or unusual. Conspicuously absent are contemporary comments from Jagger and Richards.

The film's major flaw, however, is its failure to examine the historical, social and political context that shaped Jones's life. The musician was born in Cheltenham, United Kingdom, shortly before Nazi Germany began bombing English cities in 1942. His

childhood took place as Britain slowly recovered from World War II. British imperialism was forced to accept decolonization and other limitations on its international role.

By the early 1960s, the younger generation had begun to rebel against the social hierarchy and traditional mores. The gradual ending of the postwar boom, along with the US war in Vietnam, contributed to an international wave of strikes, student radicalization, antiwar protests, campaigns for civil rights and national independence struggles. These developments, which must be understood to fully appreciate the Stones' music and collective persona, pass largely unmentioned throughout the film.

Jones was born to Louisa Beatrice Jones, a piano teacher, and Lewis Blount Jones, an engineer. The family was solidly middle-class and considered itself superior to many of its neighbors. Although he sought to please his parents, Jones was not interested in the respectable future they envisioned for him. As a teenager, he became drawn to the blues and jazz. He learned to play clarinet and saxophone before his parents gave him his first guitar.

While he was still a teenager, Jones was kicked out of his parents' house because of his increasing rebelliousness, and this experience marked him. Before long, he moved in with his girlfriend and her family. When his girlfriend became pregnant, Jones made tracks. This became a pattern that he would repeat numerous times.

After moving to London and playing in blues bands, Jones sought to form his own group in 1962 by placing an ad in a music paper. Strangely, the film does not mention Ian Stewart, who was the first to respond and remained a member of the Stones, as a pianist and road manager, until his death in 1985 at 47. Jagger and

Richards also joined and came to look up to Jones, whom they acknowledged as the bandleader. The latter also taught Richards a few things on guitar.

Jones saw the Rolling Stones as a way of bringing attention to the Chicago blues musicians to whom he was devoted. In the film, Wyman praises Jones's swooping, shivering slide guitar on "Little Red Rooster," a song first recorded by Howlin' Wolf. The band's early records have Jones's stamp all over them. During the band's initial success, he, not Jagger, was the sex symbol and got the most fan mail. He took care to answer it and encourage fans' interest in the blues.

When Andrew Loog Oldham became the band's manager, he began making changes and gunning for bigger success, especially among teenage fans. He kept Stewart behind the scenes, thinking that he didn't fit the band's image. Oldham also took on the band's organizational responsibilities and encouraged them to write their own songs instead of playing blues covers.

No longer needed as manager, and with little songwriting ability, Jones found himself sidelined. Jagger and Richards began writing songs, and Oldham pushed them to the fore in interviews and publicity materials. They began to see themselves as the leaders of the band and took to making fun of Jones, which reinforced the latter's insecurities. Yet his musical contributions remained outstanding. He came up with the insistent guitar hook for "The Last Time," which was one of the band's first original hit songs.

Through their own talents and Oldham's promotion, the Stones became a huge success. Never standing still, they kept up an intense schedule of recording sessions and tours, often fighting off mobs of crazed fans. Jones entered a new world of celebrities, artists and hangers-on and found that he liked it. He not only continued his romantic conquests (often of women who looked like him), but also began using drugs avidly.

Using his creativity and ability to play seemingly any instrument, Jones managed to emerge from the shadow of Jagger and Richards. The erstwhile blues purist greatly expanded the Stones' palette by adding marimba ("Under My Thumb"), sitar ("Paint It Black"), dulcimer ("Lady Jane"), recorder ("Ruby Tuesday") and Mellotron ("She's a Rainbow") to their songs. Jones's contribution usually became the song's signature. He even played alto saxophone on the Beatles' "You Know My Name (Look up the

Number)."

But Jones's drug use became increasingly heavy. French singer Zouzou, one of his girlfriends, says in the film that he drank from morning to night without ever appearing drunk. He also took LSD and other drugs eagerly and recklessly. Why did he go to such frightening excess? The film never probes this question deeply.

Jones became increasingly erratic and unable to contribute. Believing that he had become a liability, Jagger and Richards fired him from the band he had founded. Roughly three weeks later, Jones was found dead at the bottom of his swimming pool. His tragic demise anticipated those of Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Jim Morrison and others. Jagger and Richards did not attend Jones's funeral.

After Jones's death, the Stones recorded outstanding and enduring albums such as *Sticky Fingers* (1971), *Exile on Main Street* (1972) and *Some Girls* (1978). But their music was never again as multicolored and diverse.

One strength of the film is that it reveals the many contradictions that marked Jones and perhaps drove him forward. The musician was sensitive and often behaved like a consummate gentleman, even to the extent of kissing ladies' hands. Yet he occasionally treated ex-girlfriends and bandmates with indifference or outright cruelty. A notorious bohemian and drug abuser, Jones nevertheless craved his parents' approval. He was a psychedelic dandy and gadabout but remained acutely insecure about his appearance. While these personal details are to some extent telling, a greater examination of social and historical issues would be needed to understand Jones more profoundly as a man and an artist.



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