



When Bad Boys Go Soft

The Rolling Stones' 'As Tears Go By' launched Jagger and Richards' entry as bona fide singer-songwriters

BY MARK SEGAL KEMP

In 1964, Mick Jagger and Keith Richards desperately needed a hit that would offset the Rolling Stones' image as just a bad-boy blues-rock cover band with an attitude. Their manager, Andrew Loog Oldham, had a solution: The boys would write a pretty ballad—something asexual that an innocent young pop chanteuse could sing.

Voilà! "As Tears Go By."

The original version of this Stones classic, recorded by then-unknown 17-year-old singer Marianne Faithful and released 50 years ago, began with 12-string guitar, light percussion, and a prominent oboe part, with a swelling string section creeping in after about a minute.

With its slight Spanish feel and melancholy lyrics about feeling trapped in a bubble of depression, the song was like nothing Jagger and Richards had ever come up with—and it was a smash. Faithful's version

shot to No. 9 on the British pop charts and reached No. 22 in America.

By the time the Stones went into the studio to record their own version, their rivals, the Beatles, were riding the success of a similarly downcast acoustic-guitar ballad with strings, "Yesterday."

Not to be outdone, the Stones underscored the 12-string guitar part in their own arrangement of "As Tears Go By"—released on their 1965 album *December's Children (and Everybody's)*—and did away with the percussion altogether.

Beginning with Richards' spare and crisp, fingerpicked 12-string intro, the Stones' fairly stripped-down version is more immediate and intimate than Faithful's—and more Baroque folk than Baroque pop. For a full 40 seconds, you hear nothing but Richards' guitar and Jagger's aching vocals. When the strings do come in, they sound much like the string quartet

that accompanies Lennon and McCartney's "Yesterday"—subtly, but surely, keeping the emphasis on the acoustic guitar.

"As Tears Go By" represented a dramatic turning point in the Rolling Stones' development—from American blues/B&B wannabes to full-fledged singing and songwriting pop stars able to compete, toe-to-toe, with the Beatles. Within a year, the Stones would be cranking out even more acoustic-based Baroque pop and folk ballads, including "Lady Jane" and "Sittin' on a Fence." Within three years, they'd be recording entire albums based around such folk, country, and blues-rock songs as "No Expectations," "Dear Doctor," and "Factory Girl" (*Beggars Banquet*), "Country Honk" and "You Got the Silver" (*Let It Bleed*), "Sweet Virginia," "Torn and Frayed," and "Sweet Black Angel" (*Exile on Main St.*), among others.

But it all started with "As Tears Go By." **—GK**

SONG TO PLAY >>>

As Tears Go By

BY THE ROLLING STONES
WORDS AND MUSIC BY MICK JAGGER
& KEITH RICHARDS

Intro

G A C D

12-string acoustic guitar

On Tour

Stephen Inglis Thomas Leeb Shawn Jones

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