A Briton Blasts The Beatles

By NIK COHN

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The Beatles and the Rolling Stones have released new albums simultaneously, a clash that's tough on the Stones because they're obviously going to get a bit overlooked in the rush and they don't deserve that. They've really produced much the better record.

They've been through a bad two years, the Stones, during which time they've mostly sat around and done nothing. They've been slowed down by a series of drug busts, they've grown far apart as personalities, they've seemed aimless and the last album they did, "Their Satanic Majesties Request" was disastrous—pretentious, drab, full of ninth-hand innovations.

Then, during the spring, they finally showed some signs of getting themselves together again. They came through with two strong singles, "Jumping Jack Flash" and "Street Fighting Man." Now, with their latest thing, Beggars Banquet (London stereo PS539), they've brought it all back home.

Simply, "Beggars Banquet" is terrific and on it the Stones have managed something I thought they'd never do: They've reached real sophistication without losing any of their basic fierceness, without toning down the violence or sexuality or deepdown evil at all. It's as vicious and uncompromising as "Satisfaction" or "The Last Time" or "Have You Seen Your Mother, Baby" ever were, only it ranges wider. Its lyrics are sharper and Mick Jagger sings better. The melody lines are more flexible and the meanings more complex. The whole thing works at one level deeper.

Why the improvement? Partly, it's because the Stones now have their best producer yet, Jimmy Miller, who understands their essential wildness but restrains them whenever they try to degenerate into empty ranting. More important, though, it's because they've finally faced up to their own true

strengths. They've recognized that they're no great thinkers but that they're a perfect rock band, the best there ever was, and so they've cut out the frills. They've got back to bedrock.

Among the individual cuts, the obvious stand-out is "Stray Cat Blues," a favorite Stones theme, the stray cat being a 15-year-old groupie climbing the stairs to their pad ("bet your ma don't know you can fight like that, I bet she never saw you scratch my back"). And, of course, they've done this kind of thing many times before-"Back Street Girl," "Yesterday's Papers," "Under My Thumb" — and it's always brought out true evil in them but this is the nastiest yet,

Jagger himself is demonic: he comes in on a tiny snicker, fat lips flapping, and builds all the way to flat-out hysteria, flinging out abuse at random. Behind him, the guitars scream derision, the bass lines are like so many fists in your face. In every way, then, it's a sick performance, pure sadism, and it's also the most wildly exciting track they've cut in years.

Of the other cuts, "Street Fighting Man" reappears and still sounds splendid, a great incoherent roar of rage such as they used to make three years ago, a true successor to "Get Off of My Cloud" and "19th Nervous Breakdown." "Doctor Doctor" is country, full of mouth-harps and mandolins, and "Squalor" runs wild ("the girl I'm to marry is a four-legged sow, I've been soaking up drink like a sponge"). "No Expectations" is a ballad, rather beautiful; "Sympathy for the Devil" has some pompous lyrics about atrocity through the ages, and trots out all the expected references: Jesus Christ and the Blitzkrieg and the Kennedys, but remains a strong melody line. "Prodigal Son" is country blues, surprisingly convincing, with fine acoustic guitar, and "Jigsaw Puzzle" is a stab at profundity, a tract on the bewilderment of our time ("Mo I wait so patiently/with



Rolling Stone Mick Jagger
Better than the Beatles?

my woman on the floor/just trying to do this jigsaw puzzle/before it rains any more"). Musically, it's brilliant and, lyrically, it's not as bad as it might have been.

What's most impressive, though, isn't any track in particular, it's the whole thing—the sustained strength and range and concentration of it, the musical intelligence and the self-discipline, the way it's never petty, the way it doesn't flag for a moment. No question, it's their best album.

By contrast the Beatles' al-

bum is nothing. It's titled simply The Beatles (S W B O 101), it comes in a plain white cover and it covers 30 songs lasting for almost 90 minutes. It ranges wide, from classic rock through country and Western through avantgarde electronics to mock-1930, from the city blues through schmaltz through English music-hall and back to mainline pop again. It is, by turns, solemn and facetious, despairing and camp, maudlin and uproarious. Quite obviously, it's been put

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Continued from Page I together with endless care and tenderness and, finally, it's boring almost beyond belief.

What's gone wrong basically, the trouble is, simply that rather more than half the songs are profound mediocrities. They're not new, the lyrics aren't sharp, they're not even felt. Mostly, they're rehashes of stuff that the Beatles have already done much better elsewhere.

Even worse, faced by such deadwood, the Beatles haven't played it open but have covered up with a tortuous network of cross-references, injokes, pastiches and throwaways, a dreadful sniggering at their own sources. And, as they said they would, they've returned to their roots in fifties' rock but they haven't gone back hard, they don't mash out anything really loose and raucous. Instead, they hide behind send-up: the middle eight of "Back in the U.S.S.R.," for instance, is pure surf-age Beach Boys but it's all half-hearted and limp; the Beach Boys themselves did it ten times better.

In this way, scattered through the album, there is mock-cowboy ("Rocky Racoon"), mock-West Indies ("Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da"), mock-blues ("Yer Blues"), mock-blues ("Goodnight"), even mock-Beatles ("Glass Onion") and none of it works, it all loses out to the originals, it all sounds stale.

What survives in all this? Not very much: "The Continuing Story of Bungalow Bill" is cheerful homicide, with an instantly hummable melody and some good Lennonesque lyrics ("Hey, Bungalow Bill, what did you kill, Bungalow Bill?"). "Don't Pass Me By," Ringo Starr's first published composition, is the Beatles five years back, straight ahead and clumsy and greatly enjoyable, backed by a beautiful hurdy-gurdy organ and made perfect by Ringo's own vocal, sleepwalking as ever. "Why Don't We Do It in the Road?" is a fragment, a nice one; "Revolution," taken much slower here than on the single, has excruciatingly smug words but remains a brilliant melody line. "Helter Skelter" is solid hardrock and "I'm So Tired" harks back to "I'm Only Sleeping," not nearly as good as that but not bad either. For the rest, it's dross almost all the way.

The only track that I've found myself actually playing for pleasure has been "Happiness Is a Warm Gun,"

which is obviously mostly by John Lennon and which stands in roughly the same tradition as "A Day in the Life" and "I Am the Walrus."

As usual, "Happiness" includes more than its share of half-baked poeticisms ("she's well acquainted with the touch of the velvet hand like a lizard on a window pane") but, towards its climax, it breaks into a marvelous parody of high school rock in the mid-fifties, of groups like the Diamonds and the Monotones, and Lennon keeps repeating the title phrase, "happiness is a warm gun," and the Beatles sing "bang bang-shoot shoot" in back of him. Just this once, the take-off has edge, it's not pure self-indulgence.

About the album as a whole, I still think it's bad but I don't think it matters much—the Beatles are going through a bad patch right now and their ego trip it out of control but they're too restless, too self-critical and

too clever to stay like that. Next time around, no doubt, they'll make it good again.

In the end, though, listening to the two albums side by side, I feel again what I've always felt, that the Stones are potentially the biggest group ever, that Jagger is the natural Elvis of his time.

The Beatles, of course, are more profound, they're sharper and more inventive, they're really much more talented. But the Stones are excitement and flash and sex. they're pure wildness and that, finally, is what rock lives off. And now, because they've so abjectly mishandled themselves, I don't think that they're ever going to explode quite as hugely as they should have done. I think they've missed their chance but, still, "Beggars Banquet" has it all, everything it takes, and it makes any other album issued this year look dumb.