



Chuck Leavell on the road with the Allman Brothers in the mid-'70s, with his touring Steinway and Rhodes.
Photo by Jon Sievert

CHUCK LEAVELL

BY ERNIE RIDEOUT

MICK JAGGER COVERS
the 200-foot-wide
stage seemingly in a
few strides. He reaches

out, bent on touching each of the 50,000-plus screaming Rolling Stones fans, pulling them to their feet, every move he makes amplified by a factor of 20 on the overhead video wall. Keith Richards leans into his Telecaster, chunking out the hooks that shook the world, while Ron Wood looks on, his smoke bent at an insolent angle as he grins. Bassist Darryl Jones and the horn section cover stage right, backup singers stage left, flanking Charlie Watts, swinging behind his kit. The band's energy fills D.C.'s FedEx Arena.

As if on cue, every member of the Stones turns to look at the guy behind the B-3 at the back of the stage. Chuck Leavell beams a smile and gives a hand signal, and the guitar solo transitions into a final chorus. Later in the set, a few anxious eyes seek out Chuck as things seem to get a bit hairy; he reassures them with a nod on a downbeat. One hit follows another, but in place of the expected rock cliché, guitar-headstock cue endings,

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the band focuses on the keyboardist as though he were Toscanini. Even Mick keeps an eye on the keyboard chair at nearly every transition.

It's clear that Chuck wields considerable influence over the World's Greatest Rock 'n' Roll Band, and many observers give him the unofficial title of "Musical Director." "Well, to me Keith is really the MD," he demurs, "but I don't mind helping out when it's needed." Being one of the finest rock keyboardists of all time himself, it's no surprise that his 20 years with the band have led him to some sort of integral position. But Chuck is anything but in the spotlight with the Stones; even the trombone player gets more solos than he does (Michael Davis is the Bobby Keys of the 'bone).

The Stones rely on Chuck to carry on another important aspect of their 40-year tradition, one far from center stage yet of prime importance when the highly touted *40 Licks* tour was in rehearsal. It fell to him to catalog and arrange the nearly 150 songs the Rolling Stones wanted to dust off to celebrate their anniversary. Even the earliest songs were resurrected for inclusion in the constantly changing set list; some had never been performed in public at all. Even many of the lyrics had to be transcribed so Mick could relearn them. All of these lead sheets, lyrics, and charts are kept in two enormous binders—the Holy Tablets of Rock—that travel with Chuck's backstage racks. But the information also resides in Chuck's head, and it's this that the Stones depend on to guide them through long-forgotten arrangements onstage.

"This tour is reaching farther back than any other tour," says Chuck, relaxing backstage in the mojo-bedecked X-Ray Lounge. "We've done tunes that haven't been heard in a long time, such as 'Parachute Woman,' 'Love in Vain,' 'Mannish Boy,' 'She Smiled Sweetly,' and 'Rip This Joint,' which has got to be the fastest tune they've ever done. We'll do three, four, or five songs off of a single record in a row. *Exile on Main Street* has been a big favorite, *Some Girls* has been another, and *Let it Bleed*, too. I've always been a fan, so to get to play those tunes is really something."

TIME IS STILL ON THEIR SIDE

Though the current emphasis would seem to be on music history—an impression underscored by the "greatest hits" approach of the new double CD set *40 Licks*—Chuck reveals that the band is working on new material as much now as they ever have.

"Before we began rehearsals for the tour," he says, "we had a month of sessions in Paris. The main objective was to get four new songs for the retrospective *40 Licks*. We went in knowing that was the goal, but in the end, we'd recorded about 25 pieces. They weren't all finished, but 60 percent of them could easily be finished, and the rest could be explored at a later date, too. And there were more songs coming as we were recording."

CHUCK LEAVELL

“The point is that this is a band with an extraordinary work ethic. All you have to do is look at the body of material; it’s insane how broad, deep, and great it is. And we’re poised for more. One reason is the passion. They love writing songs, recording them, and performing them. And because of the work ethic, they’ve just become better and better at their craft.”

Even at the songwriting stage, Chuck is much more than a sideman to Mick and Keith. “Sometimes I’ll have input into a song arrangement right from the beginning,” he says. “Sometimes they already have things worked out and I can just add the glue to a track, or add some sparkles here and there. I believe they have me on board because of who I am and what I do, so they expect me to bring something to the table. They’ll always ask me what I think: Should it be acoustic piano, Wurlitzer, Hammond, synth, or should it have no keyboard at all. One of the new songs that stands out for me is Keith’s ballad called ‘Losing My Touch.’ It’s a nice piano feature, and it shows a side of the band that you’ve never seen. We recorded it all together, for the most part in one take.”

HE KNOWS IT’S ONLY ROCK ‘N’ ROLL

Chuck’s own contributions to rock history quite apart from the Stones put him at the top of every player’s list of favorites. From the unforgettable piano solo on the Allman Brothers’ “Jessica” in the early ’70s, to his stunning work on Eric Clapton’s *Unplugged* in the ’90s, Chuck’s mastery of the keyboard has always allowed him to get more music out of an eight-bar rock solo than most mortals can squeeze out of a four-hour gig. And recent recording successes on songs like Train’s huge hit last year, “Drops of Jupiter,” keep him on the airwaves and on lots of CD players.

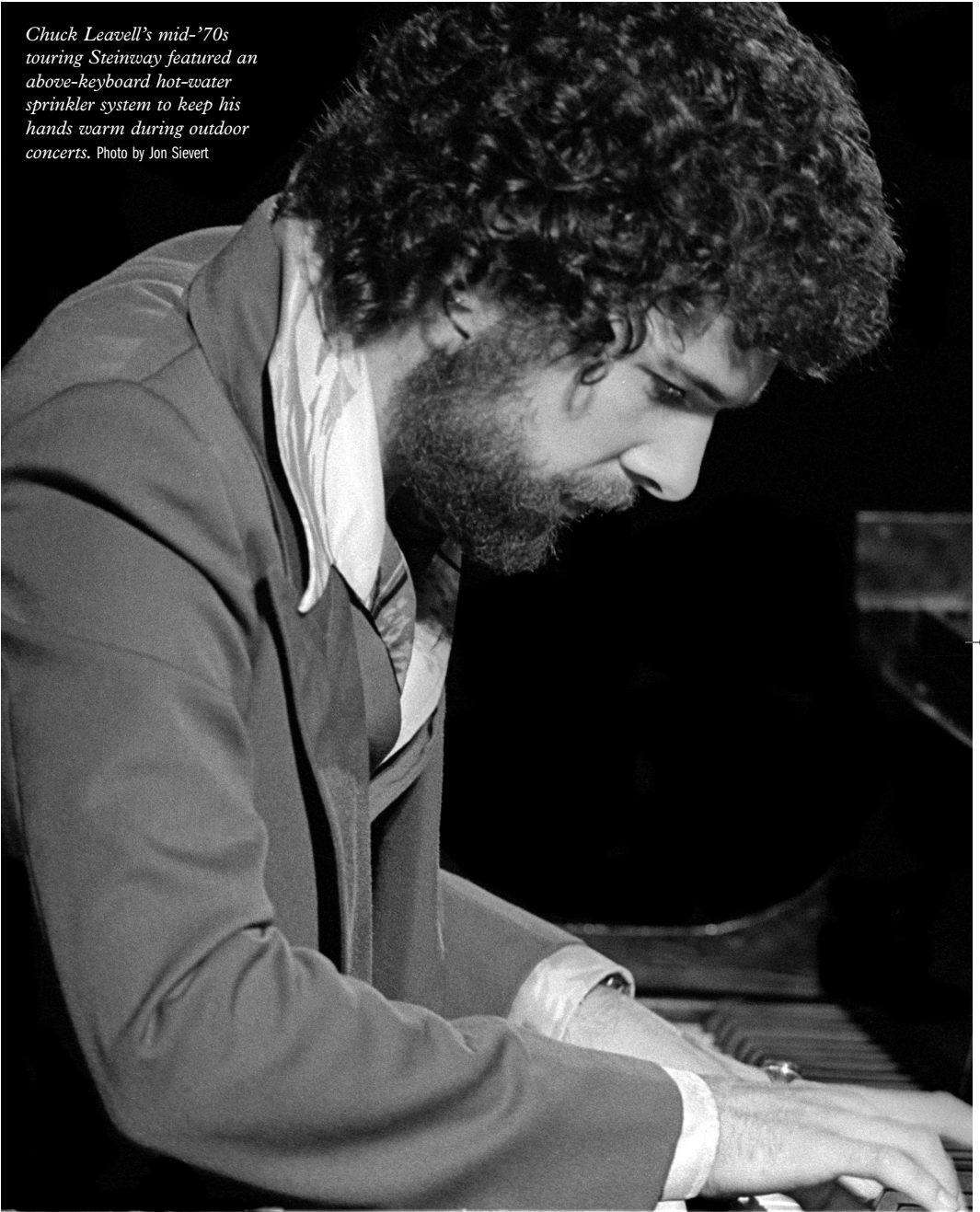
With the Stones, Chuck proudly carries the flame of rock piano as it has been passed to him by his revered predecessors in the band. “It’s an honor to work with these guys, and boy is it fun,” he says. “I may not get to go out front with a lot of solos with this band, but that’s okay. The role is much broader than that. Through these 20 years, I’d like to think that I’ve left a mark on the band, that I’ve graduated from my original role as sort of second keyboardist to Ian Stewart, to a player who has put his own style into the mix—as well as navigating the band through this massive number of songs and arrangements, keeping track of the ongoing changes, and providing a certain balance to the music.

“A lot of other great players have left their mark on the band. Nicky Hopkins stands out—he was such an inventive piano player. He always came up with something that was memorable for those songs. Like on ‘Angie,’ his piano part is more than just fills, it’s full of beautiful melodies. His parts helped make the songs what they are. I try to be careful; if we’re doing a song that he worked on, I certainly don’t want to alter it too much, but I have to play it my way at the same time.

“Ian Stewart left his own mark on the band. His motto to me was, ‘You

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Chuck Leavell's mid-'70s touring Steinway featured an above-keyboard hot-water sprinkler system to keep his hands warm during outdoor concerts. Photo by Jon Slevert



CHUCK LEAVELL



always want to have them hear the diamond tiaras up top, Chuck.' He'd play all this boogie-woogie stuff, but he'd put these little things on top, and they make you feel good; they're just right for the song. Then, of course, you've got Billy Preston's contributions, especially on organ, like on 'Don't Wanna Be Your Slave,' 'Melody,' or 'I Got the Blues.' Ian McLagan's playing was incredible, too."

All too often, the assumption is that playing keys on a Stones tune involves nothing more than a straight-eighth, "Great Balls of Fire" approach. Nothing could be farther from the truth, as Chuck himself learned when he first started rocking alongside Ian Stewart. "At the start, I'd play straight, but Stu would say, 'No, you're missing out,' and he'd show me how to fill out the left hand. There's a lot more room for swing in the Rolling Stones than people realize—Charlie Watts is a huge part of that. Here's a guy playing in the world's greatest rock band, and really, all he wants to be is a jazz drummer. He can tell you who played what on everything Charlie Parker ever recorded. The point is, he brings that swing factor into the band. That's one of the things that make the Stones so unique. And I totally lock into that."

Even when the pyrotechnics blow sky-high on "Sympathy for the Devil," Chuck doesn't let the excitement override his sense of good technique. "There's an art to playing

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rock and roll piano,” he says. “Playing hard all the time can be a problem. You have to learn to relax. You have to play with finesse and find the right groove. Sometimes you need to restrain yourself in order to do those really wacky figures. Really good rock and roll piano playing is so much more than just banging it out. It’s more about listening to the whole and complementing the other players—and it’s not as easy as it looks!”

STONE TOOLS

“For my gig with the Stones,” says Chuck, “my primary concern is to have great piano, organ, and Wurlitzer sounds. It’s a meat and potatoes deal.” For the *40 Licks* tour, Chuck gets a double helping of meat and potatoes: The tour features two stages whenever they play an arena-sized venue. The “A” stage is the large stage with all the lights, towering video display, and fireworks—where Mick can really strut. Stage “B” is about the size of a small nightclub platform 100 yards from the main stage, which the band reaches by sauntering along a walkway that parts the teeming masses at a certain point in each show. On Stage “A,” Chuck has his beloved MIDI B-3, a B-3 supercharged by Paul Homb of Keyboard Specialties in St. Petersburg, Florida. “This is my baby,” says Chuck. “We recently had it refinished and tightened up. It’s a great weapon. I can play piano from the lower manual and B-3 from the top, and I can combine sounds. It gives me a lot of flexibility. I have multiple ways to slow or speed up the Leslie, and I can brake it, too. The Leslie is enclosed completely in a combination road case and isolation booth. The mics are mounted inside, and we just plug the cables into the outside of the case. It eliminates bleedthrough, which is a big problem. Because you can’t see whether the Leslie’s spinning or not, I have a two-LED system on the lower part of the manual of the B-3 that lets me know if it’s going fast or slow. And we have a heat sensor with a temperature gauge on the case, for all those hot days.”

Sitting on top of the MIDI B is Chuck’s Wurlitzer 200A, whose outputs and sustain pedal have been modified to accommodate its Hammond-top situation. A Yamaha P200 furnishes Chuck with his trademark piano sound. Way out on Stage “B,” Chuck has another P200, this one topped with a Korg CX-3.

For all the apparent simplicity of the gig, Chuck has a few racks up his sleeve, too. “There are a few percussion loops that I trigger,” he says. “On ‘Sympathy for the Devil,’ I trigger the intro. Since it’s so important, I’ve got a few backups. The original is on an Apple iBook running Pro Tools LE. That’s backed up by a TASCAM MX-2424 with the same loop. Then we have a backup on audio CD, too. When it’s time to recreate some of the sounds such as strings on a ballad or some other percussion part, I’ll use my Korg Triton.” Chuck has a Triton on Stage “A,” plus a couple of Triton racks underneath the stage. A pair of Kurzweil K2600s provide the sitar sound on the chorus of “Street Fighting Man,” among other sounds.

CHUCK LEAVELL

NOT LOSING HIS TOUCH

For every tour the Stones have mounted in the past 20 years, there has been a chorus of critics who chide the band for being simply too old to rock. Chuck's always ready for that one. "They've gotten hit in the press for some of the recent records," he says. "But I tell ya, those tunes have stood the test of time. We've only gained ground. It's getting better, like a bottle of fine wine. The guys are still writing great songs. And yes, the total combined age may be 235-1/2, or whatever crap someone came up with, but the average weight is 145 pounds, and that's fightin' weight. This band is in shape, and it loves to play."

Portions of this article appeared in the January 2003 issue of Keyboard magazine.

FOR MORE ON CHUCK LEAVELL

Since this article was published, Chuck toured the world with the Rolling Stones on their *Bigger Bang* tour, and recorded a great new live set. You can keep up with his news and activities at his official website, www.chuckleavell.com.

A SELECTED CHUCK LEAVELL DISCOGRAPHY

Chuck Leavell is one of the most-recorded keyboard artists in rock and roll. In addition to the work below, you can hear him on the best recordings of the Allman Brothers, the Black Crowes, Eric Clapton, Government Mule, and scores of others.

WITH THE ROLLING STONES

2005 *A Bigger Bang*

2004 *Licks Live*

2002 *Forty Licks*

1998 *No Security*

1995 *Stripped*

1994 *Voodoo Lounge*

1991 *Flashpoint*

1989 *Steel Wheels*

1986 *Dirty Work*

1983 *Undercover*

AS A SOLO ARTIST

2008 *Live in Germany: Green Leaves and Blue Notes*

2005 *Southscape*

2001 *Forever Blue*

1998 *What's in That Bag?*

2005 *Chuck Leavell: Piano Instruction Vol. 1. (Educational DVD)*