

Thursday afternoon. Rock hack puts a call through to New York. She is waiting to speak to a very famous person, a living legend, one of the progenitors of the twentieth century's wildest art form. Somebody says hello. Rock hack dissolves.

"Hi, you must be Keith Richards!"

"That's right darlin', yeah. Intact."

What?

"Intact."

"I can't believe I'm talking to you!"

"It's just one of those things you'll have to live with," and the legend lets out a great big wheezy chuckle. He's just come back from dinner and his speech is ever so slightly slurred. Keith Richards' voice is part well-bred Englishman, part ancient black drawl and he is prone to deep, ironic chuckles. The immediate impression is one of great amiability and good will. It's been four years since the Rolling Stones' guitarist released his first solo album (*Main Offender* is his latest offering) and twenty years since the Stones visited New Zealand. Does he remember playing here?

"Remember? I remember

everything. I'm like an elephant," and Keith proceeds to reminisce about his first visit here with Roy Orbison, whom he lost on tour and eventually found in Rotorua "with his shades on and his face as red as a lobster up to his neck in mud. I said, 'Roy, this is the way I like you!'"

It is so strange to be talking to someone whose life and times have become part of the mythology of our culture. I am talking to a person whose im-

age I have studied for years in books about the history of rock, all those photographs of Keith and Brian and Anita swingin' through the 60s, or Keith slumped back stage in the 70s, blank-eyed and stoned, the original elegantly wasted youth.

don't think about it at all. It's only when other people mention it to me or I see conscious copies of me that I even think about it. It's a hard thing to explain. I mean, I'm just who I am, darlin', and that's what I do and I play with some great

Robinson or Izzy imitating your licks, your moves, your clothes?"

"Yeah I know and mostly the moves and the clothes. I dunno. At first I figure, 'oh, do me a favour' and then I check myself and think, 'eh Keith, everybody has to start some-

hearing —

"Little Richard, Chuck Berry. Within a matter of a few months suddenly all these gifts arrived and suddenly that's what I want to do — 'if I can make a sound like that'. We didn't know if it was black or white when we

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I put it to Keith that he wrote the book on rock cool. His licks, his moves, his wardrobe, his drop-dead glazed-eye stare have been copied by everyone from the local dude lurching down the road in long scarf and shades to Izzy Stradlin of Guns n' Roses and the Black Crowes' Chris Robinson. How consciously did Keith Richards create that style or was he simply being himself?

"It just oozes out of me," replies Keith, quite seriously, "I

guys. I have two great bands and I'm doubly blessed. I probably shouldn't exist and I'm probably a madman and everything else.

"The image, I'm aware of it but it's nothing that I have to — I shave it, I shave Keith Richards every morning and we have a real conversation there and then I just get on with whatever it is I do. It's the way I am, it's the only way I can exist."

What do you think when you see people like Chris

where'. I'm kind of ambivalent about that because in a way there's a warm glow that guys take that as a place to start from. I find it kind of weird in a way, yeah. It's the music that counts. But after all these years to be picked up upon — every band's got one. But there you go, I turned a few guys on and that's what a musician's supposed to do, y'know."

The Stones, along with the Beatles and one or two eccentric geniuses like Hendrix, created the blueprint for everything that was to follow in rock music. I ask Keith how it feels to be part of the very bedrock of rock and roll. He replies without hesitation.

"As I go on, I believe that there's only really music, and to me you can't divorce rock and roll from the blues. If a musician doesn't know his blues he's never gonna cut it in rock and roll. He can be a big star

heard 'em, it was just sheer sound and sheer turn on and a release from your childhood."

Was there one song in particular that had that effect on you?

"For me, 'Lucille', Little Richard. That was one that I just walked by and heard a few bars and stopped in my tracks and it changed my whole life. That was it. Dedicated."

To many of us, the eras your music helped create — the swinging 60s, the decadent 70s — seem terrifying and romantic. Are you ever nostalgic about those days? Do they seem to possess a lost glamour?

"No, done that. The 60s were great, it was fantastic, it was amazing to watch the world change before your eyes. Especially from the perspective that I was thrown into. One moment I'm in this dedicated bunch of blues guys that think it's totally unhip to be famous

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"NAH, NOT PARTICULARLY, IT JUST KEEPS YOU AWAKE LONGER OR PUTS YOU TO SLEEP QUICKER, IT'S NOT GOING TO MAKE YOU BETTER."

and he can be loads of other things but music is a continuity and to me, on the gravestone it says 'He passed it on'. The guys that I learned from — Muddy Waters, John Lee Hooker, Johnny Johnson — it's part of their life. It's not a matter of trying to be a star or when do you give up. You rock till you drop, it's part of you and to me that's the most important thing. This is not an act, this is what is."

Did you ever feel that being English hampered your ability to play rock music? Not just because you're white, but because rock and roll is an American thing.

"I know, it's an interesting one, that. I tell ya, the generation I grew up in — the Beatles and the Stones — we grew up in the rubble of World War II. Your playground was a bombsite and the sweets were rationed until 1954. The war didn't finish till rock and roll arrived. To English guys of my generation, it was incredible because it came from nowhere and suddenly our world went from black and white to technicolour overnight, with just one rock and roll record. Whether it was 'Heartbreak Hotel' or 'Lucille' or 'Maybe Baby'. Suddenly you realised the war was actually over. So I think that flash really had an incredible trigger for English guys at that point, to suddenly hear this music. American rock and roll had been going on for years and years, it just got a name in 1956, but as a music you could hear it in any road house down south, in the mid-west, New York, anywhere. But in England it arrived, it was a release, we felt we'd been let out of jail. And I know that feeling."

And that was from

and suddenly to be famous and watching it all from another angle.

"But at the same time I'm always very wary of putting everything into decades. It just doesn't work for me. The next load, they'll be just as incredible, there'll be just as many things happening. I guess I'm getting philosophical in my old age, right?"

But what about the whole weird, crazy, out of control aspect of those times? Things seem safer now, and less glamorous.

"Don't know about safer, darlin', not in this town. I think if the 60s did one thing, it showed how fragile everything is. Civilisation is really a thin veneer and it can crack and crumble under the slightest pressure."

What about the whole matter of how clean living musicians are today? They've learned from yesterday's casualties.

"Yeah, but how do you really know? I don't think people are any cleaner or dirtier than they ever were. It's a facade everybody puts on. After all, there is a good case to be made for checking the act here and there. When I was in my sewing wild oats phase nothing that terrible could happen to you. I can't imagine growing up now, thinking about AIDS. I mean, check it out, this is serious. Part of me says, 'wow, was I lucky'. I slipped through the grooves there doing everything I wanted, sharing needles, all that crap, silly boy. And I got out at the right time."

"The pressures of growing up today are pretty much unimaginable to me because you could do pretty much anything you wanted throughout the 50s, 60s and 70s. You weren't going to die from anything except