

# A Sweet Tooth for the Stones: 'Brown Sugar'

*Sabotage Times*, Summer 2012

GOD IT'S TEDIOUS when ancient hacks wax nostalgic about formative pop memories – memories sacred to them but rarely to their readers. So stop reading now if you'd prefer to swerve the boredom of learning how 'Brown Sugar' changed this boy's life.

It *didn't* change his life, anyway: I was exactly the same dreamy 12-year-old fantasist the day after I bought 'Brown Sugar' from The Record Shop [sic] in Sudbury, Suffolk, for the sum of ten shillings (or were we already decimalised by then?). It was my first 45rpm purchase, and maybe the defining investment of my life to date.

The Stones at the start of the '70s were *my* Stones, not the naughty urinating delinquents of the '60s but the certifiably debauched aristo-tramps of London's vulgar new decade – not Swinging, just hanging. 'Brown Sugar' assaulted and electrified me as T. Rex assaulted and electrified me. I put the little disc on the crappy little turntable and – as Keith Richards let loose his louche riff (that turned out, years later, to have been Jagger's) – rock 'n' roll began.

I watched the disc spin, Warhol's lolling tongue pierced by the spindle and revolving demonically as the sound of the single wafted up to me. It was as if the Stones were *inside the contraption*, in some notional dark space with their amplifiers and hangers-on, their entire *retinue*! The track rolled and lurched and swaggered and stuck out its narcissistic tongue at me. It was "only" rock 'n' roll, but I worshipped it. (As I write this I am going over Hammersmith Bridge in a bus, glancing down at the spot where the Rolling Stones posed in 1965 for a photo on a poster I had framed last week.)

I was troubled enough by Mick Jagger – the name of a Dickensian vagabond, surely – even before he sang on "Brown Sugar" of slaves and "black girls". Was this rock god a racist or a negrophile? I couldn't decide, and I knew nothing about Claudia Lennear (the song's inspiration) or about brown heroin, though I may have known that the slovenly-looking Richards was *au fait* with that deadly substance.

In March I was at a "pop conference" in New York where Eric Lott – a rockademic prof at the University of Virginia – talked brilliantly about 'Brown Sugar' and its gleefully flaunted racism: 40 years came full circle for me as Eric played the record and dissected the lyric that appeared on a screen behind him.

I once wrote – and why *not* quote oneself! – that the Stones live were never as "loose, funky and charged" as they were on *Sticky Fingers* or *Exile On Main St.*, and I'll stand by that. 'Brown Sugar' invented sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll for me – or perhaps, more accurately alchemically *turned* sex and drugs into rock 'n' roll.

Almost all popular music since has, for me, been a faint echo of that very big bang.

© Barney Hoskyns, 2012

