record constitutes an advance for The Stones. It is more sophisticated than their previous work in terms of orchestration, and there is some development of the composing style (using two tempi within the same piece, etc). Some of the songs are effective continuations of typical themes; notable are on with the show, a very arrogant degradation of parental enjoyment, and 2000 man, a portrayal of alienation from psychobiological reality. The latter can be compared with The Beatles’ Nuckere Man, and the comparison clearly demonstrates the greater critical force of The Stones’ work. In other ways, however, particularly when this record is compared with The Beatles’ most recent work, it seems to be a failure. The attempts at complex sound mixes, such as the one which concludes the album, are confused compared with The Beatles’ best work in this area. Also, it seems that the lyrics are more frequently obscured on this record than ever before, so that some of the music (the citadel and the lantern in particular) is hard to evaluate. Previously, The Stones had never equalled the hi-fi achievements of The Beatles, but this had not mattered so much, because the general intention was simpler. A considerable amount of space on this record is wasted. The long instrumental passages are nice to dance to, but there is nothing remarkable in them, and they do not have the same force as the songs. Also, because they are obviously orchestrated, the shamanistic intention behind them is rendered ineffectual. Nigel Weymouth and Mick Farren do this kind of thing much more effectively simply by banging and scraping everything they can find in the recording studio. Lastly, there is the question of the ventures into psychedelicism, which had never previously played any part in The Stones’ programme. Without trying to dismiss psychedelicism from a vulgar materialist/behaviourist position, one can still criticize songs such as in another land and gomper on the grounds that the imagery is hackneyed, and because, in general, the attempt to evoke a climate of mystery, ‘hallucination’ and dream is not nearly so successful as The Beatles’ Strawberry Fields or I Am The Walrus. On the present evidence, The Stones are at their best when they keep away from this kind of material. However, one cannot conclude after listening to this album that The Rolling Stones have sold out and lost their potency. Obviously they are floundering in unfamiliar territory, but we can expect recovery and reassertion in their subsequent music.

Comment

Richard Merton

Alan Beckett’s assessment of the Stones must be unequivocally welcomed. It represents the first serious critical account of the group to be written. The current maudlin patronage of pop music by Sunday newspapers and literary weeklies makes it all the more important to establish a genuine canon and the concepts necessary to underpin it. A politique des auteurs is required. Alan Beckett’s critique of the Stones, following his prolegomenon to pop music (NLR 39), is a pioneering start.

His analysis, however, calls for some comment. He unerringly isolates the distinctive circle of themes which form the effective ambit of the Stones’ music. The account of the key songs which enact them is in many respects a model. It is this approach which may, however, be
questioned. Beckett’s method is to align the Stones’ music on an evolutionary axis borrowed from psychoanalysis. The perspective is a basically psychological one. Thus the music expresses ‘narcissism’ and ‘arrogance’, which may have a liberating effect on ‘the individual’, but invariably leads to ‘paranoia’ and ‘persecution’, unless transcended towards a more ‘reparative’ attitude. The Kleinian connotations of this line of argument are evident.

My own view is that this terminology contradicts to some extent the intention of Beckett’s analysis, and involuntarily buffers the explosive potential of the Stones’ music. Some retranslation of the concepts used by Beckett may be necessary to capture the exact nature of their achievement. Let us take ‘narcissism and arrogance’ first. Beckett uses the odd phrase ‘in heterosexual relationships’ to complete this. The implication seems to be that it might equally well be in a homosexual relationship, but contingently is not. But this confuses the essential issue. Under my Thumb, Stupid Girl, Back Street Girl or Yesterday’s Papers are about sexual exploitation, not narcissism. The one is a permanent, structural feature of our society, the other a random psychological stance of the individual. The enormous merit—and audacity—of the Stones is to have repeatedly and consistently defied what is a central taboo of the social system: mention of sexual inequality. They have done so in the most radical and unacceptable way possible: by celebrating it. The light this black beam throws on the society is too bright for it. Nakedly proclaimed, inequality is de facto denounced. The ‘unmitigated triumph’ of these records is their rejection of the spurious world of monadic personal relationships. They are concerned with the oppressive matrix that is their general truth.

The same is true of the second main theme articulated by the Stones—mental illness. Again, this is a tabooed topic, as a normal social experience. Elementary reflection confirms that it is so, yet polite convention relegates it to the realm of the particular and abnormal. Beckett surely misrepresents the insistence on this by identifying it merely with the image of an ‘archetypal girl—rich, spoiled, confused, weak, using drugs’ from Chelsea or Kensington. Not only is the moralism of these epithets dubious; the Stones’ subject-matter is clearly far wider. Mother’s Little Helper, for example, is not about a rich girl, but an average housewife of middle-age. Paint it Black, another of this cycle, is about the confident male himself. Mental collapse is not an exceptional breakdown: it is a prevalent condition, part of the ordinary routine of living under advanced capitalism. The third important theme, this time not emphasized by Beckett, is eroticism. Once again, this is tabooed territory. The two antipodal classics here are, of course, Satisfaction and Going Home—precise musical notations of grinding physical blockage and jubilant physical release. The unity of lyric, melody and instrumentation has never been surpassed. These songs are uniquely brutal and truthful, broaching realities which are constantly denied or diluted in the enervating mists of traditional pop music.

If this account is reliable, it is incorrect to say that the Stones are ‘not major innovators’. Perhaps a polarization Stones-Beatles such as Adorno constructed between Schoenberg and Stravinsky (evoked by
Beckett) might actually be a fruitful exercise. Suffice it to say here that, for all their intelligence and refinement, the Beatles have never strayed much beyond the strict limits of romantic convention: central moments of their oeuvre are nostalgia and whimsy, both eminently consecrated traditions of middle-class England. Lukács’s pejorative category of the Angenehme—the ‘pleasant’ which dulls and pacifies—fits much of their work with deadly accuracy. By contrast, the Stones have refused the given orthodoxy of pop music; their work is a dark and veridical negation of it. It is an astonishing fact that there is virtually not one Jagger-Richards composition which is conventionally about a ‘happy’ or ‘unhappy’ personal relationship. Love, jealousy and lament—the substance of 85 per cent of traditional pop music—are missing. Sexual exploitation, mental disintegration and physical immersion are their substitutes.

A final comment. The reason why an appraisal of the group has some importance is this. Britain today is a society stifling for lack of any art that expresses the experience of living in it. Our theatre is a quaint anachronism, our novel is dead, and our cinema a mere obituary of it. Perhaps the only art form which has an authentic expressive vitality in England is pop music. It at least reflects back to us the immediate constituents of experience, even when it does not illuminate them. It is no accident that it is the one product of contemporary British culture which has any international currency. For how long?