

GRRR! IORR

The Album



GRRR! is a greatest hits album released by the Rolling Stones on November 9, 2012 to commemorate the band's 50th anniversary. It included two new songs to help capture the fans who had to own every song good or bad, of which I am one.

Reaction

GRRR! seems to have been a common reaction of Rolling Stones fans when they learned the title of this 50th Anniversary compilation and saw its cover. This was the album art a lot of people loved to hate. And it was not just the fans. The BBC said, "On the debit side, the stupid title and stupider cover artwork of GRRR!! Seem to suggest that

enthusiasm was in short supply as the Stones' camp approached yet another permutation of their greatest hits." Fans hatred of the title and cover is well-documented in 60 pages of an iorr.org discussion forum entitled GRRR! The Rolling Stones. Here is a sampling of some of the comments that can be seen there.

- If that's the cover and title, it's shockingly bad; and the title..."GRRR"???
- I am stunned, it's surreal - awful title for an album celebrating 50 years of one of the world's greatest musical acts. It sounds and looks like a f***n joke.
- The cover, title, and concept are terrible, ridiculous, and boringin that order. what happened to these guys?
- Its the kitsch cover art and crap title that have me upset.
- This is just a really really bad decision. I hope for their sake that they change the artwork NOW. This is horrific. Cartoon gorilla = Stones artwork? Unreal.
- GRRR!???? really? Who came up with that title, a 2 year old?
- I can't wait for the interview explaining this childish artwork. No one will actually like this artwork. It makes ZERO sense. There is no back story, no theme, NOTHING that can redeem this artwork

"What do you think GRRR stands for?" one iorr.org writer asked before answering the question with "Greatest Rock 'n Roll Rebels." Others were not so kind.

- **Greatest Rock and Roll Ripoff**
- **Geriatric Rockers' Re-Releases**
- **Gonna Rehash Rock Rubbish**

It went downhill from there.

Perhaps so, but I must try.

Walton Ford

Walton Ford is an artist in the league with the most talented men and women the Stones have chosen to grace the cover of a Stones album with their art. He was born in 1960 in Larchmont, New York and went to college with the intention of becoming a filmmaker. A talented storyteller, he took up the challenge of telling his stories in large-scale watercolors. He would blend depictions of natural history with political commentary. Ford's animal portraits are layered with clues, jokes, and erudite lessons in history and folktales. His Wikipedia entry says in part: "While staying uncannily faithful to the natural history mode, Ford paints on a much larger scale, producing outsize watercolors with epic compositions. He renders his scenes with operatic drama, capturing moments when the natural order changes, such as the last members of a species struggling just before extinction."



Enter the gorilla. When King Kong is brought to New York City and put onstage, Ann Darrow, played by Fay Wray (1933 film), says to Jack Driscoll, played by Bruce Cabot, "I don't like to look at him, Jack. It makes me think of that awful day on the island." Ford used this line as the title of a 2011 exhibition at the Paul Kasmin Gallery on Tenth Avenue in New York City. The King Kong 'tribute' comprised a trio of large watercolors painted in 2011, each nine feet high and twelve feet wide that

breathed powerful emotion into the expressive face of the beast.

The oft-repeated back story said these paintings reflected Ford's experience of his recent divorce and his father's death. On the record, Ford claimed he had wanted to paint King Kong for years. Ford said, "The depression era Kong was misshapen, not modeled on any living ape. He has an odd, ugly, shifting charisma like Cagney, Edward G. Robinson, or Bogart. Naturally, his woman screamed in terror. She continued screaming throughout their time together. The grief of the original Kong is the grief of the unloved, and like Humbert Humbert or Frankenstein, the grief of the unlovable. In 1933, Fay Wray says words that would break any suitor's heart. She shrinks from the chained Kong and tells her human lover, 'I don't like to look at him...' Since Kong is a Hollywood tough guy, he covers up his heartbreak with violence and anger. These paintings are about Kong's heartbreak. I wanted to reveal the monster's grief, his enormous sadness, the sorrow that the original Kong kept hidden from view." It was not until his divorce and the death of his father that he had fully experienced the anguish of being "unable to have what you really want, to have the thing you love. The idea was to give this monster the chance to grieve properly, to provide a real resolution to heartbreak."

Hung in a theatrically-lit room of the gallery, the three paintings progress from left to right. Kong goes from worried (“I don’t like to look at him, Jack”) to angry (“It makes me think of that awful day”) to sad (“On the Island”).



This was the beast that would become the transformed cover ape for the Stones’ anniversary album.



The three faces of the traumatized Kong, painted by Walton Ford.

First, The Cover, Then, The Title

The Rolling Stones put a lot of effort into their 50th anniversary celebrations. The compilation of recordings was, of course, a big part of that. When it came time to consider cover art, Mick Jagger asked his friend, contemporary artist Walton Ford, to design a cover. Ford said, “Mick had seen my paintings at Paul Kasmin Gallery and had bought a painting and some prints of mine. When the 50th anniversary came, the Stones were looking for artists to create visuals for the celebration.” This was Ford’s first album cover art project. Asked who came up with the album concept Ford said, “Mick and I had lunch and it seemed like we both came up with the concept together. I had just finished the King Kong project so it felt fairly obvious to want to build upon that. I see the Stones as kind-of silverbacks in the rock-and-roll world anyway.”

Ford, who made a career painting naturalist scenes, repurposed one of his recently completed sympathetic paintings of King Kong. A long-time Stones fan, Ford acted in the spirit of the Seventies, National Lampoon magazine and “grotesque underground comics” and added the Stone’s tongue-and-lips logo to the great ape. Comparing the Stones to King Kong, Ford said, “All the metaphors of King Kong and all of that are applicable – their kind of enormity of their accomplishment over the period of 50 years.” Explaining the choice process, Ford said, “Mick and Charlie got the ball rolling with me and presented the other Stones with the ideas that we had come up with. It’s a proper democracy; everyone has veto power and a say. They don’t move forward unless everyone is on board.” The Stones loved the image and they decided to use it on the cover of their 50th anniversary compilation *GRRR!* as well as a

“I was born in 1960 and I had an older brother who collected records. The Rolling Stones were pretty much it for us growing up. That’s what we aspired to be – that sort of attitude.”
Walton Ford

centerpiece in their massive marketing campaign for their “50 and Counting” tour including a unique augmented reality marketing campaign. The Stones released a statement that said in part, “The irreverence of Walton Ford’s imagery captured the spirit of the tour.” Asked about the origin of the album title, Ford replied, “The Stones named the album after I made the painting.” They embraced their silverback role and went with *GRRR!*

The Cover

Vinyl discs were contained in a box. So, the album cover was the box lid. It had the band name in black, the album title in red, and the art work- a brown-eyed ape with a family resemblance to King Kong except for his fanged Stones logo lips, teeth, and tongue.



The Rear Cover

The rear cover was the bottom of the box that contained the records. The rear of the album is a simple track listing with production credits at the left bottom. There are five vinyl LPs in the set. Each LP has five tracks per side.



Individual sleeves for the vinyl discs were simple. The disc number in GRRR! font is found on one side and the disc's track list is found on the flipside. Imagine five of these.



GRRR! Font

The band name and album title are written in a very distinctive GRRR! font created by Hingston Studios, which handled the art direction for the project. Tom Hingston was gracious enough to provide this explanation. "For GRRR! we wanted to create a visual language that felt very raw, primal and charged with energy. And so we used the hand drawn typography as a device to embody those things. Originally it was created for just the title, and to accompany Walton Ford's incredible Silverback painting, but was then later developed as a full, bespoke alphabet used across the campaign – on every touchpoint – from print, online to outdoor and then the live shows.

Something particularly enjoyable about this project was creating the limited edition, in which we conceived the idea for a book featuring 50 objects from the band's archive - one for every year. In curating this we were able to go and visit the archive, which is housed in deepest west London. We spent four days sifting through and photographing individual objects, so you have everything from Charlie's first drum kit to the Rolls Royce that Mick and Bianca got married in, in St Tropez. The jewels in the crown."

GRRR!

A BESPOKE HANDWRITTEN
TYPEFACE CREATED FOR
THE ROLLING STONES

50TH

ANNIVERSARY ALBUM CAMPAIGN

The font appears on the book cover, CD discs and vinyl disc sleeves. The photo below shows the contents of the 4 CD Super Deluxe Edition, with the addition of a view of the book's cover and an example of a vinyl disc sleeve (1).



It has become increasingly challenging to discuss album art with the proliferation of so many different releases. GRRR! was made available in four formats. There was a 3-CD, 50-track collection with a 24-page booklet; a 3-CD, 50-track deluxe edition with a 36-page hardback book prepared by Hingston Studios and five postcards; a 4-CD, 80-track "super deluxe edition" with a bonus CD, poster and other goodies; and a 50-track 12-inch vinyl box set.

Is It Kong?



Is the great ape on GRRR! actually Ford's King Kong? A simple comparison suggests it is not, but then this author is not qualified to comment on how a gorilla's appearance is affected by aging, albeit only a year or so. GRRR!'s nostrils are much closer to its lips than Kong's and Kong's forehead is more pronounced and vertical than GRRR!'s. GRRR!'s eyes are more deep set than

Kong's and GRRR!'s countenance appears to have hairier eyebrows and more of a brown hue than Kong. There is, however, a striking family resemblance between the two great apes.

Those Nasty Fans

Not everyone was pleased with the logo and Ford responded. He said, "A lot of people didn't like it at all. That was good. I was glad that they didn't like it. I mean, the last people who I wanted to please were Rolling Stones fans. They are really nasty. It's a general rule they have a fan base that just seems to be always angry at the Rolling Stones for a lot of reasons. They've got their own grudges. I shouldn't say that I didn't really care. I probably did care, but when the Rolling Stones were doing their best work, they were a step ahead of the people that loved them so much. I thought, 'How cool that I get an opportunity to piss their fans off?'"

The Logo



Ford did a pretty credible job of reproducing the logo on the cover gorilla. A curved upper lip with two white specs evident. Four nicely rounded teeth

on both, although GRRR! has two sharp fangs. Tongues with a dark midline and a white streak on each half of the tongue that is supported by a bottom lip on the right side. John Pasche would be proud of the likeness.

Augmented Reality

The Stones have often bled on the cutting edge of entertainment technology. For their 50th anniversary greatest-hits collection, "GRRR!," they offered free Android and iOS apps as part of an ambitious augmented-reality marketing campaign in which people could use the app to watch the illustrated King Kong-like gorilla that is featured on the cover of "GRRR!" visit landmarks around the world.

Pocket-lint ran the following headline: "The Rolling Stones launch world's biggest AR campaign for GRRR! greatest hits album."



The article went on to say: "No less than 50 cities (one for each year the band has been around) and more than 3,000 locations are involved, including the Houses of Parliament in London, the Skytree in Tokyo, Sydney Opera House and, of course, the Empire State Building in New York." If fans used the free app and point their phone at one of the tagged buildings an animated virtual 3D gorilla would appear. Fans were encouraged to take pictures of the Gorilla animations in action around the world and share them via Twitter, including the hashtag #GRRR! as part of a promotional contest with Stones swag prizes.

The Cast of Characters



Walton Ford and Hingston Studios

Ending

A Stones album cover stirred its first controversy in April 1964 when the Stones dared to release an album with no title and no band name. In their fiftieth year as a band, they were still at it. This time it was some fans who criticized the cover.

The Rolling Stones are the proverbial 600-pound gorilla of rock and roll. If all they have to say after 50-years in the business is GRRR!, well, that's okay with me.

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