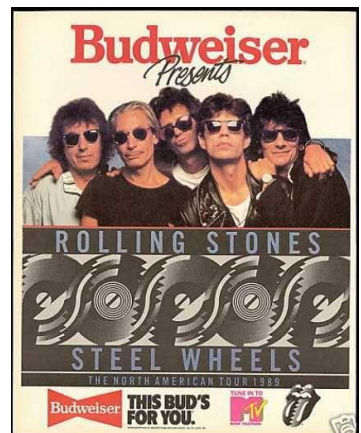


Steel Wheels

They're Back

The Rolling Stones Incorporated Reunion could have been the title for this album and tour. Keith Richards said, "The Stones are bigger than any of us when it comes down to the nitty gritty," and they were. This is also when the Stones became a commercial force to deal with by launching their largest worldwide tour ever on the biggest stage ever constructed.

The Stones changed the concert business for the biggest acts in the world. They sold their entire tour including concerts, merchandising, TV and films rights to Michael Cohl of Toronto's Concert Productions International for about \$70 million. Cohl was backed by Budweiser money. Most tickets sold for \$28.50. Through it all, ran the *Steel Wheels* album art. This is the story of that art. This art was created not just for the album art but for merchandise and the tour as well.



Albums, Tours, and the Digital Age

Nothing reinvigorates Sixties icons like having something to prove. After *Undercover* and *Dirty Work*, not to mention Mick Jagger's solo recordings, the reverence ordinarily shown to the Stones had worn dangerously thin. The Stones were, once again, a band with something to

prove. *Steel Wheels* was a self-styled reunion album released 29 August 1989. It marked a return to a more classic style of music and it launched the band's biggest world tour to date. It was Bill Wyman's final full-length studio album with the Stones and it was the first album that did not feature the sixth Rolling Stone, Ian Stewart.

Previous Stones album covers featured photographs, paintings, lenticulars, die cuts, negatives, drawings, collages and the like. *Steel Wheels* marked the first time a digital image was used for an album cover. The role of album cover art was changing. Artists were not just designing album covers they were designing art for marketing, merchandise and the stage. Their art had to sell the album concept and look great on t-shirts, hoodies, mugs, posters, banners and all manner of memorabilia. It also had to resonate with the tour staging. Album art could no longer be separated from the tour. It was becoming the key visual concept for a global enterprise.

Steel Wheels served as a therapeutic exorcism for Mick Jagger and Keith Richards, whose relationship had been deteriorating for years. It offered proof the wounds had healed and the wheels on this cart were not coming off, they were wheels of steel.

The **Steel Wheels Tour** was launched in North America in August 1989. The European leg of the tour featured a different stage and logo and was called the **Urban Jungle Tour**. It became the most financially successful rock tour in history up to that time and it cemented the Stones' return to full commercial power after a seven-year hiatus in touring marked by well-publicized acrimony among band members.

Chuck Lavelle, keyboardist for the Rolling Stones, called *Steel Wheels* kind of the rebirth of the Rolling Stones. He said, "They had not scored in seven years. I think it was do or die. Either they were going to go out here or were going to make it work. When *Steel Wheels* came around I think everybody realized the whole is greater than the sum of its parts."

Steel Wheels was the first Stones album to be digitally recorded. It was the first time Stones merchandise was

available in stores, like Macy's. It was the beginning of the super stage era of touring. No one had ever seen anything like *Steel Wheels* before. The tour introduced the biggest stage ever used for the biggest show the Stones had ever done. This also marked the beginning of pre-show meet and greets.

The Title

Richards says, "I can't remember who came up with the title but it was a working title for a song that's now called Between a Rock and a Hard Place." Between a rock and a hard place sums up the situation Jagger and Richards must have found themselves in. Neither was as good alone as they were together. "We're in the same boat on the same sea/and we're sailing south on the same breeze." Harmony was restored. The Stones were as tough as steel and here they were coming round again.

Why *Steel Wheels*? They wanted something tough, like the band itself. It's an image that evokes the new momentum of the band, which was getting itself moving again with the release of this

new record. Richards said, "...then there is the sound of the words, which is always important to the Stones."

The title was intricately tied to the album's theme which may be best reflected in the touring stage. In an ABC News interview, Charlie Watts said that until now touring stage sets were usually painted stages and Jagger added "or paper mache." Watts described the *Steel Wheels* set as a piece of industrial waste and Jagger called it a decaying industrial city and said it was, "broken down but still functioning." Perhaps like a set of steel wheels?

John Warwicker, art designer for the *Steel Wheels* album said the *Steel Wheels* title had been chosen before he was invited to join the project. He said, "In our first meeting Mick asked me what I thought of it and I responded that it made sense... with their idea of 'what was making the world go 'round. I suspect the title came first. Then Mark's [Fisher, architect] initial graphics. Then the design as you know it." The title begat the cover art, which begat the stage, which begat the title. God and the Stones work in mysterious ways.

Tours were once done to promote a new album. At the time of *Steel Wheels* the music industry's economics were in flux and albums were now necessary to promote a tour. Touring was necessary for survival. A supergroup could no longer tour behind a record like it did in the old days. Megatours were becoming the bread and butter of the Stones and other supergroups.

Apropos of the tendency to link the image of steel wheels to the wheels on a train, the tour was announced July 11, 1989 in New York City's Grand Central Station where the Stones arrived aboard an old caboose on Track 42. The album cover logo was on the side of the train and on the stage, where the press awaited the Stones' arrival. They debuted their new single, 'Mixed Emotions' on a boom box.

The press conference MC asked Jagger if the title of the album referred to hip-hop scratch DJ turntables or is it trains? Jagger did not seem to understand the question and before he could answer, the terminal announcement boomed out, "Now boarding, the Rolling Stones on Track 22 all aboard" and they walked off without answering the question. That may have been our best shot at a definitive answer. Failing that we have plenty of speculation.



It has been suggested it is a double entendre title that referred both to locomotive power and to the wheel-chairs of the aged and infirm. Others said Jagger had this album and tour pegged as emblematic of Industrial Age decline and the dawn of the Digital Age of megabytes, cyberpunks and Blade Runner-style decay. This view was reflected in the stadium production designed by architect, Mark Fisher. It was an immense sculptured scaffold artwork with catwalks, chutes and antennae suggesting a

closed steel mill, a redundant oil refinery, or a useless launching pad—all the obsolete detritus of a once-great but now-rusting civilization.

Whatever its meaning, *Steel Wheels* it would be.

The Stage Influenced the Art

The tour stage was to reflect both the status of the Rolling Stones as well as contemporary life in the late 1980s. Mark Fisher had been invited by Patrick Woodroffe, lighting director, to submit concepts for the *Steel Wheels* stage design. He became the stage architect and was thinking about the emergence of the post-industrial society, shifting from economies based on heavy industry and manufacturing to those based on information and services. The physical consequences of these changes had crept into filmmaking and writing with apocalyptic visions of urban decay and dystopian futures. These ideas, especially William Gibson's sprawl trilogy and the cyberpunk sci-fi genre it launched, formed a cultural backdrop for Fisher's designs for the Stones' *Steel Wheels* tour.

Starting from this contemporary vision of the future, Fisher began his design process by showing a large image of the NASA launch platform with the shuttle removed to the Stones suggesting such outdated or obsolete industrial forms litter the landscape of everyday life and act as monuments to dead technologies. The *Steel Wheels* set that emerged from these early discussions drew upon the powerful forms of steel mills, refineries, oil rigs, and power stations the redundant technology of industries in decline. The stage was to invoke a sense of nostalgia for a bygone age which was particularly relevant to the baby boomer generation who formed the Stones original fan base, who had witnessed this industrial decline at first hand.

A less than thrilling discussion of the stage design involving Jagger, Watts, Fisher and lighting gurus Patrick Woodroffe can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QLKIKHGIM9I&t=77s>. They were working with an elaborate model of the stage as they discussed the colors used on stage.



The stage was transported in 80 trucks with a travelling crew of 200 supplemented with 150 local hires for each performance. Longer than a football field, Jagger called it, “a constructionist stage,” Wyman thought it looked like, “a half built factory,” Wood saw a “space shuttle,” Richards said it was “undecipherable.”

Fisher called his friend and collaborator, Mark Norton, and arranged for him to submit his ideas on graphical materials directly to the Stones. The two had worked together on several projects like design schemes for Jean Michel Jarre’s huge ‘Son et Lumiere’ concerts in Paris, Houston and London, as well as the design of the Nelson Mandela Freedom concerts from Wembley Stadium.

The Steel Wheel

Mark Norton knew the album and the tour would be called *Steel Wheels*, he said, “...but that’s pretty much all we knew. Two words – that was the total brief!” Norton vaguely recalls that he began his first sketches in the late spring of 1989. He worked for around 3 weeks on the initial

concepts, prior to presenting to Mick Jagger, and then to Keith Richards and Ronnie Wood in London, at Mark Fisher's office.

Norton says Fisher, "...had started some early sketches, based on a conversation with Mick, about trying to evoke a touring version of a dystopian, derelict city. They'd also discussed contemporary science fiction literature of the time – Philip K. Dick's 'Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep' and William Gibson's 'Mona Lisa Overdrive', both of which made me feel that the graphic look for 'Steel Wheels' should be somewhat futuristic, without historical/backward-looking visual reference...I was working on graphical material quite separately to Mark [Fisher] until we brought both schemes together in the later stages of the project. I got inspired by the 'urban density' of his designs and he started incorporating my graphic motifs into the set. I then dressed his scaffolding plans with scrims made from the abstract compositions based on the Steel graphical pattern."

Norton developed a whole book of preliminary designs, trying out idea after idea. Only one of them stuck with Mick, though. The pages of notes have partially been lost but none have ever been published, to Norton's knowledge. Norton says, "I created the basic roundel. But I also created all of the repeat patterns and core components that became the album design, which was put together by John Warwicker. It turns out that when I'd presented to Mick, Keith and Ronnie at Mark's office, there had been other presentations arranged by the record company. Mick liked what I'd been doing but, at a skinny 28 years old, he worried I wasn't going to be experienced enough to deal with the whole Stonesworld thing. Come to think of it, judging by my stutter and the loud sound my knees may have been making as I started the presentation, I may well have been good with the ideas but just a bit shaky with the delivery! So, he asked for John – who was considerably more experienced in the ways of record industry than me - to work with me to progress the project. My background had been live shows, so my take on the whole project was slightly different to his. I was concerned with trying to help build an experience, not necessarily a specific piece of album packaging. And my work as a brand designer, ever since then, has been concerned more with creating an experience for audiences/customers, etc. than any one specific artifact."

John Warwicker described how he got involved with the project. "I visited Mick (Jagger) at his home and we talked and got on and it started from there." He began work, "Immediately after I received a phone call from their manager, Tony, a few days after I met Mick. The whole project took about 4-6 months. Because of the tour."

John Warwicker explains how the wheel came about. "As far as I remember I was recommended to the band, possibly by [art designer] Mark Norton of 4i. I had previously tutored Mark when he was studying for his masters at the Central School of Art in London. I'm not sure how he became involved in the project but he had a rough design but no one knew how to turn this/modify this into a cover. They also needed someone to art direct the photography and basically broaden the visualisation of the project across the marketing etc.

etc. Since leaving art school at the end of the 70s/early 80s I found myself designing record sleeves and art directing music videos. I then found myself as Head of Design and Head of Video at A&M records in London. This lasted for almost 2 years and gave me a broad knowledge into not only [sic] was required for such a project. Mark was one of the first to experiment with computer-generated graphics. It was part of our conversations when he was a student. I had studied for a masters in Electronic Interactive Media at the end of the 70s so we were pretty well matched. He had a graphic of the wheel. I amended it and created the idea of continuous pattern and art directed him to produce what is now the cover graphic.”

Steel on Wheels

Beginning about 0:06 or so of ‘Continental Drift’ Keith Richards can be heard producing a rather unique sound effect. He was trailing the blade of his knife against the spokes of a spinning bicycle wheel. The effect recurs a number of times (0:35, for example). Perhaps he should have a Bicycle credit for this song.

Asked if there were other earlier designs for the album cover, Warwicker replied, “As far as I remember there were around 96 different iterations!!! and a few other ideas, one of which was a dada-esque type treatment, to give them a real alternative. Charlie, who had trained as a graphic designer really liked the type version, as did the rest of the band. But Mick, quite rightly, understood that the computer-generated graphic was more direct and more applicable to all the merchandising requirements.” Warwicker says he has

never published any of the other versions and he declined the offer to do so here.

Warwicker was asked, had the Stones begun to work with Mark Fisher on the stage design before they came to you? Did Fisher’s theme or design affect your album cover design? He replied, “Yes. Mark had worked with them before. The stage design was evolving when I started on the project and Mark then integrated my designs within his design. By that time the cover was fairly complete. At the same time, I met the people who were going to produce the merchandise. So, everything started to work in parallel. And I developed the graphic language/approach to embrace all of this.” The influence of the Norton/Warwicker wheel design is evident in the stage photos above.

Norton’s says his design was, “Something modern, tough, post-punk (which was my own art-school point of reference anyway), shattered... not something of the past... I wasn’t interested in making a retro reference like ‘locomotive wheels’ either. It was more of a case of trying to evoke the abstract idea of forward motion, energy, *something* that was rushing past at speed, not anything representative of an actual object. That would have been too obvious – the opposite of what I wanted.”

There were several versions of the roundel. Along with my Norton’s sketches, Warwicker originally had his own concepts and also did versions using Norton’s development drawings. Norton sums up the process, saying, “But in the end, the design process took on a methodical, stage-by-stage refinement approach, until it was complete. We were also creating sections / abstracts / cut-ups for a vast range of merchandise material, a process overseen by Lance Yates

(now deceased). Lance was a sharp, commercial merchandiser, who had been put in place by Mick to make sure the whole look came together as one BRAND.”

Norton’s design was for the Steel Wheels phenomenon not simply for the album cover. He said, “... the point of a really good, simple-but-evocative-but-punchy design motif/logo/symbol/design system - is that it needs to work well at all sizes. If it can’t do that, it isn’t much use to anyone creating a multi-media project like Steel Wheels.”

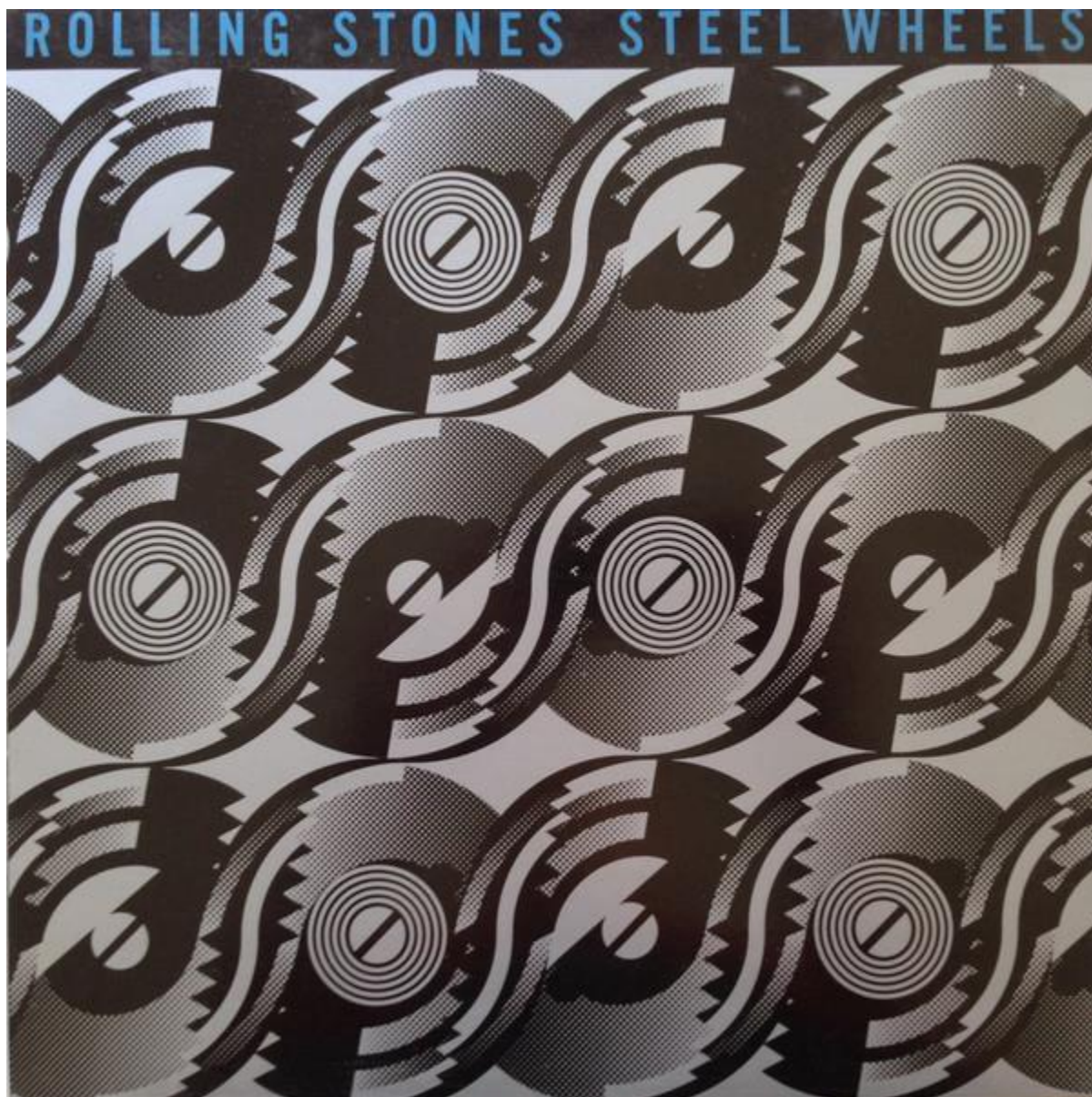
The Cover

The New Musical Express (NME) describes the cover as “...a plain, distinguished sleeve...The classy simplicity of the cover art heralded a new dawn for the band, a new era with fewer pairs of shocking pink slacks.” Another blogger asked, “Are these wheels? Are they steel? I don't get it - but it's not pretty, anyway.”

The front and back covers, although not identical, have the same motif: 12 black and gray roundels that could be seen as 12 steel wheels in reference to the title. If you prefer more esoteric explanations they could be 12 discs alluding to the arrival of the CD in this post-industrial era.

Presented with some of the various explanations for the title and the art, Warwicker was asked what it represented to him. He replied, “The rhythm of the visible and invisible built. To slightly mis-quote Winston Churchill - ‘we built the world, thereafter it shapes us’. This rhythm is not monotonal but micro-tonal, the finished graphic as far as I remember is not blindly repetitive but like a Steve Reich composition has these micro-tonal differences and progressions. Interestingly, and to my surprise, Charlie was a Steve Reich fan.” That is exactly what I thought.

Warwicker describes the cover, “The original sleeve was printed with a metallic silver pantone as the background colour. And the type was printed in pantone metallic blue. But after the first run, for cost reasons, it was all changed to 4 colour.” The CD has a post-industrial polished steel look of machinery to it.



Printed across the top in blue on a black background are the name of the band and the title of the album.

Inside the front cover of the clear plastic jewel case is a booklet consisting of eight two-sided pages. Thus, the front of the booklet is the actual album cover. This is the first time there was not really an album cover so much as a booklet for a Stones album.

The pattern of wheels differs by row. Rows 1 & 3 are alike, although slightly offset. Row 2 had a different pattern for each style of wheel. Looking at the first row of roundels there are two designs, call the first one A, the second one B. In row two there are similar but distinctly different roundels, call them C and D. Then the pattern on the front of the booklet, considering only whole or mostly whole roundels, is:

A, B, A, B

C, D, C, D

A, B, A, B.

The rear of the booklet is visible on the left inside of the jewel case once it is opened. It is the same pattern as the front offset a bit differently.



The pattern is:

Half of B, A, B, A, Most of B

Third of D, C, D, C, D

A, B, A, B.

The rear of the album cover, inserted into the jewel case, is a single sheet of paper, slightly larger in size than the removable booklet pages.



Jewel Case Rear Cover

A, B, A, B, A

Partial D, C, D, C, D, Partial C

Partial A, B (covered), A, B, A, Partial B with logo over last two wheels

The track list was originally provided in red ink. There were subtle variations in subsequent releases, such as the one seen above.

The Photos

While working at A&M Records Warwicker found a new, energetic Mexican photographer, Enrique Badulescu. He suggested him for the group portrait for the album insert. Warwicker said, "At that time the Stones had finished the album so they had gone back to their 'normal' lives, separate from each other. And I think they were rather jaded by having their photograph taken, as a group. And their time to do so was very limited. So, under my art direction we shot each member of the band separately (Bill was in St. Tropez) and montaged them together (in a computer)."

Badulescu was a young photographer, just starting out when he moved to London early in 1988 and began to photograph for Face magazine and do record covers for John Warwicker, among

other work. About 4-5 months after he arrived in London. Badulescu ended up competing against Nick Knight, a man he regarded as a legend, whom he admired very much, for the Steel Wheels job. His agent told him not to get his hopes up. Soon after he was told he got the job.

Badulescu said, "They chose me because my style was very active, action, like dancing. I was basically dancing...the pictures look like portraits but you do not know they were dancing to really loud music...I think they wanted to look, really more, like they still had a lot of energy. They did not want it to look like old portraits of old bands that reunited...They chose me and so we started one at a time. I was very young, very green, very nervous of course, and shitting in my pants I could call it...The first one was Mick Jagger. Really? Ah why could you not have started with someone else! Mick Jagger arrived, he was super cool...he arrived on the dot...he looked at a couple of outfits...I asked him what music he wanted to listen [to] ...I put, at that time Soul to Soul was very very well in the heat of the moment. At that time it was all dance music in London and he danced like crazy for like one and a half hours at the most in 3 or 2 outfits." The photoshoot lasted for 2-2.5 hours in a London studio where Badulescu experimented with a really edgy new process that made the colors pop.

After Mick Jagger, Badulescu found his confidence and everything went very well. Next was Charlie Watts. "Charlie Watts came, he was like a gentleman, he's a jazz player... Melanie [Ward] knew what kind of style he had. He actually came with his outfits. They were really beautiful outfits very Goldsmith kind of thing. Very elegant, striped, very elegant with a tie. No, he was not dancing. Just portraits of him really calm, cool, sitting, standing, no dancing. His pictures were more like pictures of a jazz player, you know, not a pop star. He was very cool, very calm, very down to earth."

Bill Wyman was next. On June 2, 1989 he would marry Mandy Smith in the French Riviera, so Badulescu headed off to St. Tropez. He recalled this trip, saying, "He [Bill Wyman] and Ronnie Wood were in the French Riviera so we went to their hotel. We set up a background in their hotel and we shot, we hung out with them...They were more like playboys kicking up there-burning themselves, or tanning themselves...They were very chatty and seemed to be very happy to be in the French Riviera with a lot of girls...and then we start shooting. We did one first, I think it was first Bill Wyman...Bill Wyman was kind of quiet, more calm, quiet, introverted I think...And Ronnie Wood was more similar to Keith Richards kind of or like Mick Jagger. He was very funny actually...We did the photo shoot they gave us one and half to two hours. They were very easy going too."

He continued, "We flew back to London and the last one was Keith Richards which was for me amazing for me with Keith Richards because he actually brought his own music which he was working on for himself, he brought some tapes, they were still using tapes at the time...He brought his music, his manager was very cool... he arrived quite late but he got lost..."

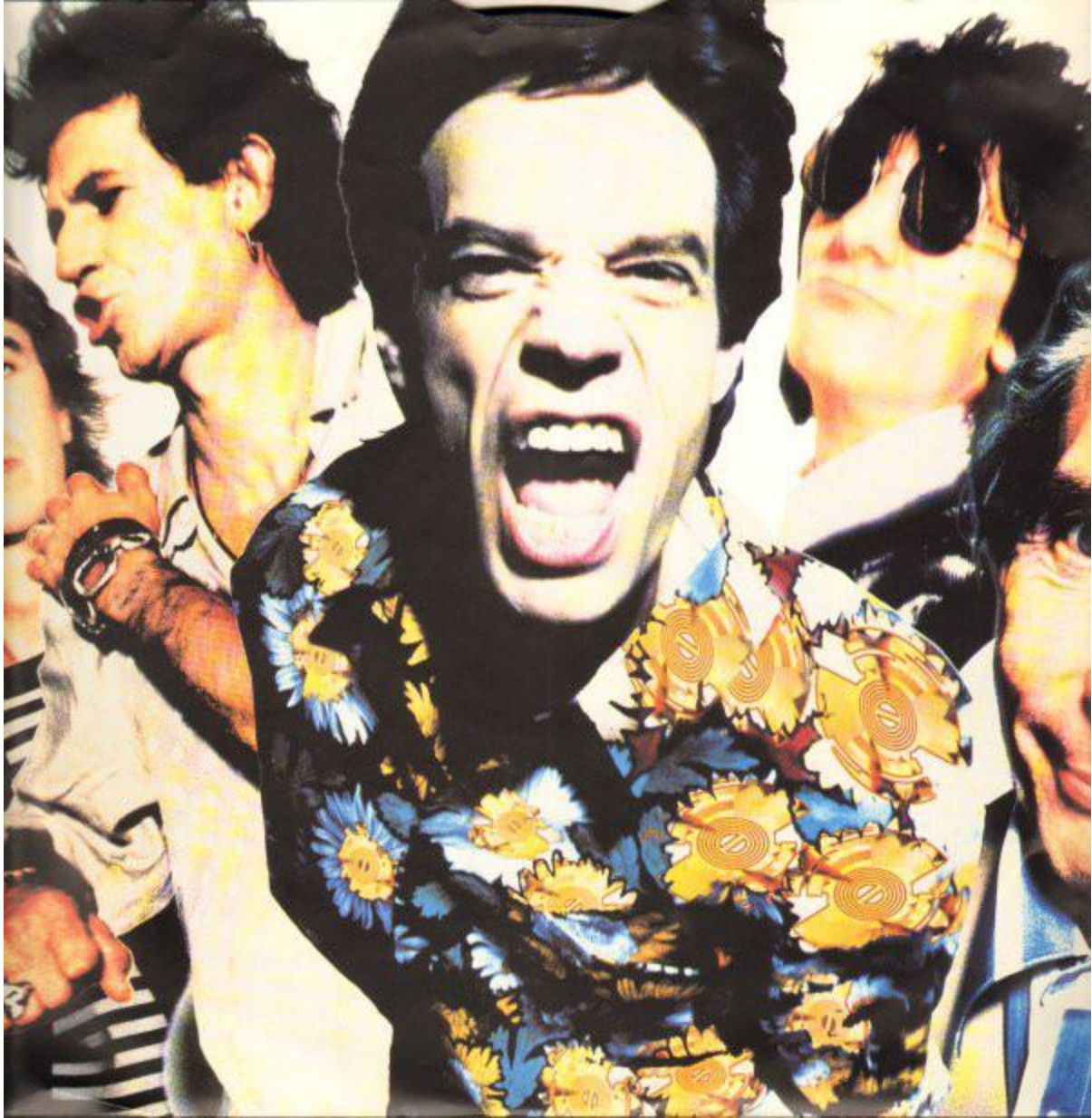
Badulescu had to go pick Richards up at another studio. "He was very chatty. He got really into it he really wanted to keep on going...he was very funny...the one that really chatted more and enjoyed it, it was great shooting him." Badulescu's deal with the Stones included a buy out

clause that meant the Stones owned all the photos taken. This is why you have not seen more photos from those sessions.

John Warwicker took the photos and put it all together. The tour book and the album insert photos are all Badulescu's work. Photos of Richards, Watts, Wood, Jagger, and Wyman alternate with the tracklist and song lyrics with a final photograph that unites the band in the montage Warwicker mentioned.



Keith & tracklist, Watts & 'Sad, Sad, Sad,' 'Terrifying,' and 'Hold on to Your Hat,' Wood & 'Hold on to Your Hat (cont.),' 'Hearts for Sale,' and 'Blinded by Love,' Jagger and 'Rock and a Hard Place,' and 'Can't Be Seen,' Wyman & 'Almost Hear You Sigh,' 'Continental Drift,' and 'Break the Spell,' Logo & 'Break the Spell,' and 'Slipping Away,' and credits.



Cast and Crew



Mark Fisher-stage architect, Mark Norton-logo design, Enrique Badulescu-photographer, John Warwicker- art direction.

30 Years and Counting

About 20 years in, solo projects and band turmoil had posed a threat to the continuity of the band through much of the 1980s. Steel Wheels was well named. It marked the Stones' "Potsdam Conference," where the leaders of the band negotiated the terms of survival for the second half of their careers. Steel Wheels are what propel this band forward. No matter the slings and arrows, this band would remain together and on the move. The rip-saw continuity of the album cover ironically spoke a truth about the band that few could have predicted at the time.

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