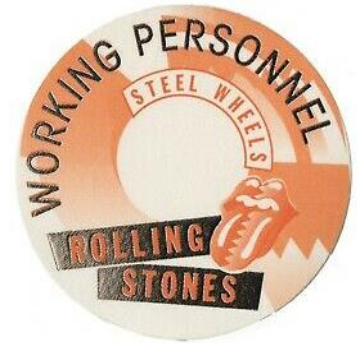


The Rolling Stone's Instant Karma

In September of 1989 I was a roadie for The Rolling Stones for exactly one day, but I'm pretty sure it was by accident.

Back in the eighties I ran a digital audio shop called SoundBytes which was listed in Raleigh as a 'recording studio' in the *Yellow Pages* (which millennials may not know is a big book of piss-colored business listings made from clipart, lies and bad design). I was just getting into my final year at North Carolina State University (BA Communications '89) when I received a call from someone with the Rolling Stones organization looking for audio help for their worldwide Steel Wheels tour (1989-1990) which was landing in Carter-Finley Stadium the following Saturday.



Hell yes! Holy crap! The ROLLING F*CKING STONES! Pinch me I'm dreaming!

As instructed, I showed up at Carter-Finley in the morning with a couple dozen locals. Our details were collected by the security team and backstage passes were issued along with stern warnings about taking pictures – I quickly hid my Kodak Instamatic. They lectured us on safety protocols, access restrictions and behavior guidelines - which seemed especially ironic as most of the Stones roadies looked high as sh*t and smelled like it too - but 'Mike' was there to keep them in line.

Mike was a huge, hairy East Ender with a deep Cockney accent and a triple wide shoe size. All the roadies deferred to him, and the respect of a thousand shows ran deep. He was like a barking troll, constantly on the move, shouting instructions and keeping it all together. I liked him.

After the orientation he came over and urged me to walk 'n talk as he inspected the back truss assembly. He questioned me about my audio skills, then put me to work unpacking gear cases until he decided what to do with me.

Just after lunch, I was in the distant backstage area conducting a self-authorized urine test with a roach in my mouth when Mike returned, motioning me over. He snatched the joint out of my lips, took a hit and tossed it away without missing a beat.

"Are you local?" he asked, "We need a local musician to help us out, can you do that?"

Sure, I was glad to help. With that we went together to seek Patrick, the lighting director, who was peering up at a distant tree line behind the main stage. Dressed like a hippie, tall and angular, Patrick seemed like an obsessed artist considering his next masterpiece.

"I want these trees back 'ere all glowing red when we do *'Paint It Black'* tonight boys, it should be a gas!" he said as we walked up, "I'm gonna need like fifteen Fresnels back here," he complained to Mike "and we ain't got 'em." Mike pushed me forward. I tried to shake his hand but he was having none of it.

"Is this the townie?" he said, "And what the fuck TOWN are we in anyway?" he asked to Mike, who shrugged.

"Raleigh" I said, feeling pathetic. "Raleigh, North Carolina".

Patrick rolled his eyes, incredulous and mumbled "Whatever."

Looking back at the tree line he paused pensively and then turned towards me with a smile and said "You gotta get me these lights, right? Can you do that? Can you do that for me?" He produced a handmade cigarette; I gave him a light.

"I know just the place, let me go and see if we can rent them," I explained proudly.

"Rent them?!" he exploded with a plume of smoke, "We're the ROLLING F*CKING STONES, we don't RENT anything!" And with that he pulled out a wad of cash, peeled off a bunch of bills and handed them to me.

"Here's five grand, you go get me those lights now 'cause I'm gonna need you back 'ere in an hour...with change!" he said, raising his voice as he glared at me. Then his Mr. Niceguy routine returned and he patted my back, grinned and waved me off saying "Now there's a good lad, don't f*ck me."

Let me be clear, these people had no idea who I was or where I lived. I could've taken that money, disappeared and they would have never found me. But you don't do it - because it's the ROLLING F*CKING STONES.

I was beyond excited, but I was also concerned. How was I going to get 250 pounds of lighting gear into my '78 Datsun B210? I found a pay phone and called a classmate with a pick-up truck to take me to the music store on Beryl Road. He was resistant until I mentioned a \$100 payment - at which point he said he'd see me in ten minutes.

After picking me up we went straight to Audio, Light & Music, a large, professional music store that was within sight of the stadium. I must admit, I entered the store like an empresario, a strutting show horse with my backstage pass, my wad of cash and my ROLLING F*CKING STONES attitude.

I was 'da man' and I milked it. Gross.

I think it was either John Heer or Bob Blair who was on staff that day and totally helped us find 10 Fresnel cannon lights, but we were still coming up short - there just weren't 15 in stock. AL&M couldn't sell me all of them because some were rentals and committed to another band

that night. We ended up calling the band (Dillion Fence?) and they released the last four to us because it's the ROLLING F*CKING STONES.

And a 100 bucks. That helped.

Understandably, the music store didn't want to be without stage lights for a week, so they offered to rent us the last four, to be returned Monday. But I stepped back, way overconfident and exclaimed, "It's the ROLLING F*CKING STONES, we don't RENT anything!"

And with that comment, the 'circle of assholery' was complete - and the ghost of Brian Jones appeared.

I returned with over two-thousand dollars in change, which I proudly slapped back into Patrick's hand - but he barely acknowledged it. After I mounted the lights on the back railing with c-clamps, Mike mentioned I would be submixing Charlie Watt's headphone monitor and I needed to report to training now. During the session they went over everything and it was clear I was just switching between presets if I'm honest - the desk was clock-locked with automation. (For geeks, it was the Harrison 10B attached to a Macintosh Portable.)

When my prep was finished, Mike called me to the Front-of-House pathway next to a speaker array that was at least four stories tall - still surrounded by metal scaffolds. Living Colour was just about to soundcheck, so I took a few pictures of the musicians coming out and gearing up. But Mike busted me and snatched my camera, looking serious.

"I think there's a ground loop (a 60hz hum) from that left side bass cabinet" he explained. He then ran up to the mixing board while I went over to check it. But that was only a ruse.

As I got up close to the speaker cabinet, I was craning to hear the buzz. Mike yelled from the board "Closer! Closer! Can you hear it?" I leaned in a bit.

Just then, the opening riff of a song I knew well ("Hey Nineteen" by Steely Dan) shook the whole soundstage to life. For a moment I was floating in the air as the first kick drum and bass dropped at 120 decibels through the 100,000-watt PA system - having been knocked off my feet and into the first row.

Despite the pounding tempest of progressive 80s pop assaulting me, I could still hear the road crew laughing like crows at the hapless townie now struggling to his feet. Mike strolled down to the front row with a smile and asked if I was ok. Then he tossed me the camera and said "Karma".

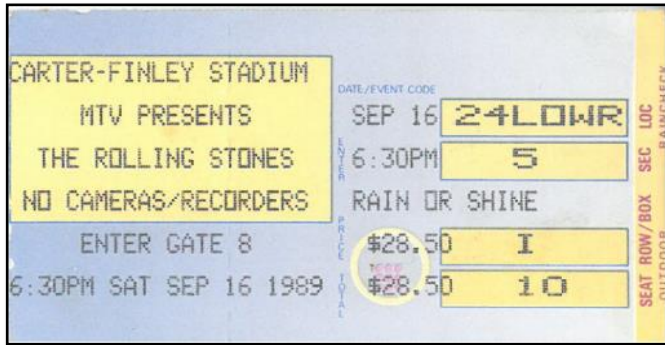
I didn't have a real function for the opener, so I just enjoyed Living Colour from backstage and ate dinner from a Styrofoam UFO. The rest of the evening was spent underneath the apron in the crew pit, a cramped and dangerous area of high voltage signs, standing water and sparking electrical cables. I was sweating constantly from the heat of the equipment as well as the hot 'Indian summer' we were experiencing.

Despite all that, I had a blast, it was a real rush to be inside a huge Rolling Stones show. I had detailed notes of what to do and when to do it, so the work part was easy. The show was going great and I was thrilled to be even a tiny part of it.

When "Painted Black" was performed, I wish I could've seen if those lights had worked. Checking the set list, there were only a half dozen songs before the end and Charlie's mix was unchanged through the encore - my job was done. Exhausted, me and a few other townies had planned to fly the coop before the show ended. I wasn't ready for three more hours of hard labor because all I really wanted was some pictures, my security pass and the set list I had just stolen.

I blended in with the shifting crowd just before the encore and disappeared into the night – but there is a cost for screwing over the ROLLING F*CKING STONES people...

As karma would have it, few of my pictures actually turned out. I was excited to develop them



for bragging rights but most of the pics were crap, featuring my perfectly focused finger in front of abstract smears of light. I tried to photograph Mick, but only took a few blurry shots of a thin old man proudly shaking his bony ass - God Bless him. A couple snaps from under the stage came out (nothing exciting) but somehow none of the Living Colour pictures came out.

(Above: Somebody else's ticket)

I *did* have two good shots right behind Charlie Watts from my stage bunker, and those were treasures to me. That's why it hurt so much later when an angry girlfriend put that, and nearly all my memorabilia, into a bag one night and disposed of it in Jordan Lake. I can't help but wonder if 'Rolling Stone's Karma' had something to do with that too, but I guess I'll never know.

Strange Postscript: My angry ex later died from exposure in Alaska, no kidding. Karma?