

UNDER THEIR THUMB

(How a Nice Boy from Brooklyn Got Mixed Up With THE ROLLING STONES and Lived to Tell About It)



By Helen Marketti

The front cover of the book shows the beginning of a journey that would last for seventeen years. Walking behind Keith Richards is Bill German at the age of eighteen. Bill is handing an issue of *Beggars Banquet* to Ron Wood (who is off camera). It was June of 1980 and life as it was known would never be the same again.

Under Their Thumb (Villard Books, 2009) is Bill German's autobiographical account of his time spent in the inner circle of the Rolling Stones. To have been privy to their world for seventeen years and all the while maintaining trust, friendships and being given first hand information for his newsletter (*Beggars Banquet*) is a remarkable experience.

Bill created the newsletter for Rolling Stones fans in 1978 at the age of sixteen. His humble beginnings and creative thought was

to provide those who were interested an opportunity to know what the Stones were up to. Naming the newsletter *Beggars Banquet* after the Stones 1968 album seemed an appropriate title for those who wanted to be "in the know" and yet still be able to afford to know.

Using his type writer to tap out the bits and pieces of information he collected while also laboring over photos Bill literally cut and pasted (scotch taped) to create his newsletters.

With the help of a friend who had access to the copy machine at his high school Bill cranked out copies, collated and stapled by hand and sold them for 25 cents a copy. He presented his copies to fellow classmates who were not interested. He left them on counter tops with the permission of record store owners in his neighborhood. It was a rough start as his first issue only made one sale.

At the time Bill lived in Brooklyn the Rolling Stones lived in New York City neighborhoods so he knew that making a connection with them would be the perfect way to have insider's knowledge for *Beggars Banquet*. He was a fan but also a journalist.

Bill explains why he has always liked the Rolling Stones, "They seemed so rebellious. I loved their sarcasm and sense of humor. They spent time in the clubs to see area bands. They were accessible."

Through a series of contacts, connections, persistence and showing up at the right place at the right time often with copies of his *Beggars Banquet* in tow; Bill managed to make sure the Stones held the newsletters in their hands personally.

Eventually *Beggars Banquet* gained momentum becoming the official Rolling Stones newsletter with fans paying for subscriptions. One of the fans was Cameron Crowe, who would

later direct *Almost Famous*. Bill handled the mailings himself and always kept things interesting for loyal readers by holding drawings and contests for concert tickets, autographed items and so forth. He devoted seventeen years to *Beggars Banquet* and to the Rolling Stones.

"I had no idea that things would last as long as they did," Bill said. "It was beyond a dream come true. *Beggars Banquet* was my only source of income for those seventeen years. It was my newsletter and I preferred to keep it that way. It was my independence. Other kids bought a car or worked a job for their independence but mine was writing the newsletter."

He continues, "They (Stones) knew I was around because of the newsletter. I had no ulterior motive. What you see is what you

get. I think they needed real friends and they felt they could trust me."

Building rapport with Keith Richards and Ronnie Wood was fairly easy and Bill became close friends with the two.

Charlie Watts was an introvert and it may be a surprise to some that Bill never had an actual conversation with him. "It's now a running joke," Bill laughs. "I was too bashful to approach Charlie and he usually stayed to

himself so we never initiated conversation with each other. In seventeen years I'm still not sure he even knew who I was."

Bill and Stones front man Mick Jagger were not



exactly best chums

either. "Mick kept his distance, kept his guard up," Bill said. "Mick is the most famous of the Stones and because of that there are more demands made on his time. He was more involved with the business side of the Stones than the other guys. He would get up early, go jogging and handle the meetings while Keith was still face down in his pillow."

He continues, "Mick did some nice things and some things that weren't very nice. He didn't like a lot of the stuff I wrote in *Beggars Banquet*. It always had to be "cleared" with layers of the Stones management and their associates before a newsletter could go to print. So many had wanted a say in what I put in my own newsletter. Eventually it turned me off and I



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started becoming disenchanted with the whole thing.”

After seventeen years Bill had enough. He decided to close *Beggars Banquet* and find the next chapter in his life although it was difficult at times to let go. “It



Keith, Bill & Bonnie, RPM Studio in NYC, 1985
Photo credit: Beggars Banquet Archive

all became exhausting,” Bill said. “I was tired of keeping up with them, the assumed names at hotels, others trying to dictate what I wrote. I saw for myself that if you wanted to keep up with the Stones you may get taken away in handcuffs or in a casket.”

“I wanted it to come to an end but I felt I needed permission to do so. At Keith’s 50th birthday party I had words with my then girlfriend and with that going on I had ran into Keith in the hallway. He said that their recording sessions had gone well and they would start an album and a tour which meant that they would have lots of things for me to write about,” Bill remembers. “I just

snapped. I made a remark to him how I’ve been writing about what they have been doing for years and that’s when Keith looked directly at me and said that no one asked me to do this,

that no one was *making* me. That’s when I knew it was ok to let it go.”

So with “permission” to be free by the Stone he was the closest to, Bill bid farewell to *Beggars Banquet* with its last issue in 1996 and his life with the Rolling Stones was over.

When asked why he decided to write the book at this point in time Bill explained, “The

memories were there and so I decided to get it all out of my head and put it on paper. I’m glad I had the time and distance to be objective. I wrote it from a good perspective. I wanted to write a true story. There is no bitterness and no rose colored glasses. The Stones are behind me but you can never really put the Rolling Stones behind you.”

Bill is continuing to work on writing more true

stories. He may write a book of his memoirs about growing up in Brooklyn. He has also been approached by a famous rock photographer to work on a book together. He says that rock and roll is still not out of his system so he has options for what his next projects will be.

Bill will always remember some of the best times when hanging

intimate musical moments when Keith and Ron would jam at someone’s house, hanging out in Ron Wood’s kitchen and writing a book with him (*The Works*) or watching them do a gig in a club for 200 people. They didn’t take themselves too seriously. They were caricatures of themselves. That’s why I did *Beggars Banquet*...to show how genuine the Rolling Stones really were.”



Bill & Bonnie Wood At the Limelight in NYC, 1984
Photo credit: Richard Kohnsberg

out with the Stones. “I always liked the real

Under Their Thumb is available at many area book stores. (Visible Voice Books, Mac’s Backs Paperbacks and The Learned Owl) Please check your local areas. It is also available at Joseph-Beth, Barnes & Noble, Borders and Amazon.com. *Under Their Thumb* has many photos of the Rolling Stones that have never been seen before.

For more information about *Under Their Thumb* and to learn more about Bill German. Please check out: www.billgerman.com

Back issues of *Beggars Banquet* newsletters can be ordered at: www.beggarsbanquetonline.com

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