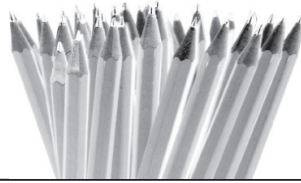


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TUMBLING DICE

JEFFREY R. DI LEO, EDITOR AND PUBLISHER

You got to roll me and call me the tumbling dice.

These famous words found their way into the musty basement of the Villa Nellcôte. Relaxing and recording in this 1854 French villa in Villefranche-sur-Mer on the Côte D'Azur in 1971, the Rolling Stones were in tax exile.

Keith Richards rented this French villa to avoid payment on the high income tax back in England. "The tax rate in the early '70s on the highest earners was eighty-three percent, and that went up to ninety-eight percent for investments and so-called unearned income," says Richards in his autobiography, *Life* (2010). "So that's the same as being told to leave the country."

The album that resulted from his "being told to leave the country," *Exile on Main St.* (1972), and the conditions of its composition have become the subject of rock lore.

"It's got a raw sound quality, and the reason for that is that the basement was very dingy and very damp," said Mick Taylor, who played lead guitar for the Stones from 1969 to 1974. "The roof leaked," continued Taylor, "and there were power failures."

Moreover, Andy Johns, who made the Nellcôte tapes in a mobile studio outside of the villa, said the "heating vents on the floor were gold swastikas." Richards told Johns that the villa "had been a Gestapo headquarters during the war."

During their exile at the villa, the scene was chaotic. "People appeared, disappeared," said Robert Greenfield who was there to interview Richards for *Rolling Stone*. "No one had a last name, you didn't know who anybody was," he continues. "It was an unparalleled cast of characters."

Nevertheless, it turned out to be a productive environment for songwriting.

"Happy" was written *and* recorded there in an afternoon.

"Tumbling Dice" though took longer.

In his autobiography, *Life* (2010), Richards, who led the scene at the villa, says that it "took a few days to get ['Tumbling Dice'] right." "I'd have been happier if more came like 'Happy,'" comments Richards. "Great songs write themselves," he continues. "You're just being led by the nose, or the ears. The skill is not to interfere with it too much. Ignore intelligence, ignore everything; just follow it where it takes you."

"I remember working on that intro for several afternoons," says Richards. "I credit Mick with 'Tumbling Dice,' but the song had to make a transition from its earlier form, which was a song called 'Good Time Women.'"

"It started out with a great riff from Keith," says Mick Jagger in an interview with *The Sun* in 2010. "We had it down as a completed song called 'Good Time Women,'" continues Jagger, and

it was quite fast and sounded great but I wasn't happy with the lyrics. Later I got the title in my head, "call me the tumbling dice," so I had the theme for it. I didn't know anything about dice playing but I knew lots of jargon used by dice players. I'd heard gamblers in casinos shouting it out. I asked my housekeeper if she played dice. She did and she told me these terms. That was the inspiration.

But if the history of "Good Time Women" ended in "Tumbling Dice" at Keith's villa, it did not begin there.

In South East London there is a district called Bermondsey. The Rolling Stones had a rehearsal studio there for a few years prior to 1971. During a visit to Bermondsey before the Stones left for France, Trevor Churchhill, the European label manager for Rolling Stones Records notices a pile of tapes in the corner. He transferred them to cassette and brought them to the villa. Among the demos and incomplete tracks he found in Bermondsey was "Good Time Woman."

Still, how "Good Time Woman" became "Tumbling Dice" is unclear.

Richards says it "may have had something to do with the gambling den that Nellcôte turned into — there were card games and roulette wheels." "Monte Carlo was around the corner."

And Jagger thinks "It's obviously the most accessible and commercial song on the record." I'm willing to grant him the latter but not the former.

"Bobby Keys and cats did go down [to Monte Carlo] once or twice," says Richards. "We did play dice." But what explains the jump from playing dice "once or twice" to the existential condition of identifying with tumbling dice?

You got to roll me and call me the tumbling dice.

After a big drug bust at the villa, the Stones high-tailed it out of France for America in October. The material they recorded erratically on their mobile studios at the villa was then mixed and mastered in Sunset Sound studios in Los Angeles.

But while the *Exile* album may have given some sense to the Nellcôte tapes, it still does not answer the existential question of the tumbling dice.

So let's now take our own roll at one.



"Philosophy," writes Alain Badiou, "is not a matter of life or of happiness." "But neither," he continues, "is it a matter death or unhappiness." "We will live or die in any case, on top of it all,

Di Leo continued on page 36

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