1 Jimmy Miller, the Rolling Stones, and Beggars Banquet

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We’d run out of gas. I don’t think I realized it at the time, but that was a period where we could have foundered — a natural end to a hit-making band. It came soon after Satanic Majesties, which was all a bit of flimflam to me. And this is where Jimmy Miller comes into the picture as our new producer. What a great collaboration. Out of the drift we extracted Beggars Banquet and helped take the Stones to a different level. This is where we had to pull out our good stuff. And we did.

— Keith Richards

What exactly is a producer?
The role of a producer in popular music can be defined in many different ways. Perhaps most often — and in particular, most often in the late 1960s — a producer came to their craft with a background as either an engineer or a musician. Glyn Johns, who engineered many Stones recordings, also worked as a producer, while Beatles producer George Martin’s background was as a classically trained musician. The Stones’ first producer, by contrast, was neither an engineer nor a musician: Andrew Loog Oldham’s background was in publicity and artist management. Every producer, it seems, has their own approach, but there are some things that they often hold in common — elements that go beyond skill at an instrument or behind a recording desk. George Martin, for instance, tells us that “the first requirement for a good producer . . . is the ability to have your will prevail without making it obvious.” adding that “a firm rapport in the studio is a must” (Martin, 1983, p. 266). He goes on to write, “the producer must get inside the very soul of his charge, and bring out the depth of feeling that lies beneath the surface” (p. 267). Albin Zak agrees, writing, “most importantly, producers must nurture the overall process and preserve a larger creative vision as the process moves through myriad mundane details” (Zak, 2001, pp. 172–173).

Jimmy Miller was a drummer, singer, and songwriter. In fact, in accessing why Miller’s production work with the Stones was so effective, Keith Richards remarks, “most of all it was because Jimmy Miller is a damn good drummer. He understood groove” (Richards, 2010, p. 236). In recalling his own experience in
the studio with the Stones, Mick Taylor emphasizes how Miller’s skills beyond musicianship also played a key role:

The Stones wouldn’t have made those albums without Jimmy Miller, Glyn Johns, and Nicky [Hopkins] being patient enough to sit there all those hours, until they made up their minds whether they’d got a decent take. Sometimes, by the time you’d done fifteen takes, you’d have to go right back to the beginning to reconstruct the song you were trying to record. Jimmy would say, “Take a break,” and it needed somebody like that.⁴

In his history of record production (and echoing Richards’s remarks), Mark Cunningham refers to Miller as a “feel producer” (1998, p. 118). As we shall see, Miller’s sense of feel and groove played an important role in the music he produced with the Stones. But perhaps more importantly, Miller was someone the Stones could bounce their musical ideas off—a fresh set of ears and an extra musical imagination in the studio that could at times contribute to remarkable breakthroughs as a song developed. Richard James Burgess enumerates seven types of producer (2013, pp. 7–25); of these, Miller would count as the “collaborative” type: “they bring an extra band-member mentality to their productions” (p. 15).⁵ At least in the recording studio, then, Jimmy Miller was a Rolling Stone.

The road to the Stones

Jimmy Miller was born in Brooklyn in 1942. His father owned a well-known nightclub in New Jersey (Bill Miller’s Riviera) and eventually ended up in Las Vegas, where he booked Elvis Presley into the International Hotel in 1969 at about the same time as his son was producing Let It Bleed.⁶ Jimmy remained in the New York area and became a musician, eventually signing as a singer to Columbia Records (Buskin, 1999, p. 127). When Miller got into the studio, he realized that he was more interested in recording and writing than in performing. He wrote and produced a single called “Incense,” which he succeeded in licensing to Island Records founder Chris Blackwell.⁷ Blackwell released the single (performed by the Anglos) in the UK and the record did well enough for Blackwell to invite Miller to England to produce the Spencer Davis Group, who at that point had not enjoyed much US chart success in spite of a string of hits in England. Miller’s first project was mixing “Gimme Some Lovin’” for US release in late 1966 (Buskin, 1999, p. 127). A comparison of the UK and US mixes of this track highlights Miller’s production talent. Miller’s US version has a slightly brighter tempo along with added percussion (including cowbell) and background vocals, making for a livelier recording. The remixed single went to number seven in the US, and the band’s next release, “I’m a Man” (co-written by Miller), rose to number ten in early 1967.

When Stevie Winwood left the Spencer Davis Group to form Traffic, Miller worked with Winwood’s new band, producing a series of UK top-ten singles, “Paper Sun,” “Hole in My Shoe,” and “Here We Go Round the Mulberry Bush,”
all in 1967. Traffic’s debut album, Mr. Fantasy, was recorded at London’s Olympic Studios during April–November 1967 and was released in the UK on 8 December—coincidentally on the same day that the Stones’ Their Satanic Majesties Request (also recorded at Olympic during most of 1967) was released. By the time Miller was asked to produce Beggars Banquet in early 1968, he was already busy with other projects. Dave Mason briefly split with Traffic in late 1967 and went on to produce Family’s Music in a Doll’s House in December 1967 through early 1968. This musically ambitious album was released in July 1968 and includes two tracks produced by Miller, “Peace of Mind” and “The Breeze.” At about the same time, Miller produced Spooky Tooth, a band built around the talents of Gary Wright.8 The debut album, It’s All About, credits Miller not only as producer but also as a co-writer with Wright on five of the album’s ten tracks. Miller also produced the second Traffic album, Traffic, which was recorded in January through May of 1968 at Olympic and released in October.

Wright provides a first-hand account of Miller’s work with Spooky Tooth, noting that Miller contributed writing and some playing in addition to his production duties. He casts Miller as a dynamic collaborative force in the studio.

He was a producer’s producer, in that he was not only a musician but a writer as well and could restructure songs to make them stronger in a matter of moments... When listening to playbacks, he would close his eyes and rock back and forth absorbing the music. At times when doing so, he would suddenly jump up and start singing a part he heard in his head that would usually greatly enhance the arrangement.

(Wright, 2014, p. 59)

Engineer Eddie Kramer, who worked with Miller on the Traffic sessions as well as on Beggars Banquet, paints a similar picture of Miller’s impact as a producer:

He had such a wonderful ability to sense where the band was at, get into their heads, get their confidence, and then fire them up in the studio and get great performances from them. He was able to put such a spark into the cutting of the tracks. I started working with him on Traffic’s Mr. Fantasy and then moved on to the Stones’ Beggars Banquet. He was an extremely impressive individual. He was able to grab the artist by the balls and bring them along with him. He could help them with song structures and be very involved on that level, or be a fly on the wall when he needed to be.

(Jackson, 2003)

The Rolling Stones and Beggars Banquet

Jimmy Miller began working with the Rolling Stones in March 1968; by Miller’s own account, the first track they worked on together was “Jumpin’ Jack Flash.”10 Glyn Johns takes credit for Miller getting the call to produce the Stones. He writes,
When the pain of *Satanic Majesties Request* had subsided, Mick told me they had decided to go back to using a producer and that they wanted an American...A few weeks earlier I had met Jimmy Miller, who was working with Traffic in the next studio to me at Olympic. He seemed like a really nice guy and was doing a great job, so I told Mick that we did not have to import anyone as there was already an extremely accomplished guy in London. Mick and Keith checked him out and he got the job.

(Johns, 2014, pp. 82–83)

It is tempting to credit Miller – at least in part – for the Stones’ new sound that emerged with “Jumpin’ Jack” and developed further on *Beggars Banquet*. But Miller has remarked that he “didn’t ask them to change direction” and that “they were ready to do so, as was evident from the new songs they played me” (Buskin, 1999, p. 128). Indeed, a survey of the records produced by Miller that the Stones might have known in early 1968 would not have indicated that Miller was eager to push beyond the psychedelia of 1967. Of the Traffic singles, “Paper Sun” features a prominent sitar part that makes it a perfect fit for the Summer of Love, while “Hole in My Shoe” combines sitar with trippy lyrics reminiscent of the Beatles’ “Lucy in the Sky With Diamonds.” The album track “Utterly Simple” serves as Traffic’s answer to “Within You Without You,” while the single “Here We Go Round the Mulberry Bush” (released in November 1967) was filmed for inclusion in the Beatles’ *Magical Mystery Tour*, though it did not survive the final edit of the film. In many ways, *Mr. Fantasy* and *Their Satanic Majesties Request* are stylistic parallels as well. It is worth noting, however, that Miller’s pre-psychedelic work with the Spencer Davis Group had been much more roots oriented and driven by American rhythm and blues. Miller remarks that “it’s fair to say that being American also helped, because...they had been raised on American records” (Buskin, 1999, p. 128).

It is difficult to pinpoint the precise contributions of a producer, especially a collaborative one such as Miller. Miller was mostly not responsible for the actual recording of the sounds themselves, leaving this work to the engineer: “As a producer I pretty much let the engineer get the sound together, and I might add my own suggestions if there’s a particular sound that I’m after or if there’s something I would like to change” (Buskin, 1999, p. 131). As we listen to tracks from *Beggars Banquet*, however, we can identify important production details that Miller likely had at least some hand in creating. In “Jumpin’ Jack Flash,” for instance, engineer Eddie Kramer describes how Richards loved the way his guitar sounded when recorded on an inexpensive cassette recorder. Jimmy suggested they use that sound, so Kramer recorded Richards’s guitar on the cassette recorder and then transferred that sound to the studio’s four-track tape machine using a microphone as the cassette played back. The band then recorded the other parts using the cassette recording as a guide. The same technique was used for “Street Fighting Man.”

“Jumpin’ Jack Flash” and “Street Fighting Man” also share a similar “drone” ending, as a single chord is sustained and various layers of music unfold
told me simultaneously and are only loosely coordinated. Such harmonically static endings can be found in earlier loosely coordinated. Such harmonically static endings can be found in earlier works – such as “We Love You.” Considering Miller’s role, it is worth noting that two tracks from the second Traffic album (recorded during the same period as Beggars) also employ similar endings: “Pearly Queen” and “Cryin’ to Be Heard.” “Street Fighting Man” features a guest appearance by Traffic’s Dave Mason on shakuhachi, further reinforcing the Traffic connection. (Ric Grech, who was in Family at the time and whom Mason and Miller were producing, makes an appearance on “Factory Girl.”) Brian Jones’s sitar and tambura on “Street Fighting Man” add a psychedelic element common to the previous work of both Traffic and the Stones. Perhaps the most effective production element in “Street Fighting Man” – and one likely attributable to Miller – is the way the choruses seem to expand atmospherically as the piano and tambura enter (with a hint of claves), opening up from the more closed sound of the verse dominated by the driving cassette-recorded acoustic guitar. Miller is likely also responsible for the pacing of the album’s closer, “Salt of the Earth.” Beginning quietly with strummed acoustic guitar and slide guitar accompanying Richards’s lead vocal, acoustic piano is added at the second verse as Jagger takes the lead. Piano dominates the bridge, as the drums enter for the third verse and Jagger and Richards sing in harmony. Choral backing vocals are added at the second appearance of the bridge, as the choir takes the verse melody before being joined by Jagger. A dynamic pullback is led by the acoustic guitar before launching into a gospel-style ending that soon shifts to double time, creating a crescendo of musical excitement as the track fades.

Perhaps no track on Beggars Banquet better illustrates the long path a track can take to completion – as described above by Mick Taylor – than “Sympathy for the Devil.” Jean-Luc Godard’s 1970 documentary chronicles the development of the song. After attempting the song in many different versions, the band finally hits on a groove – thanks in part to the congas of Rocky Dijon and the patience and constant encouragement of Miller (though this is not seen in the film) – and the track comes together. Miller is likely responsible for bringing Dijon into the session, and he may also have suggested the vocal “woo woo’s” that accompany Jagger’s lead singing (Miller is probably among the singers ultimately providing those backing vocals on the recording). Dijon’s conga playing also makes significant contributions to the last minute and a half of “Steady Strut” and throughout “Factory Girl.” Such production touches can range from enhancing a track, as in the latter two instances, to transforming it, as in “Sympathy for the Devil.” In Zak’s terms as mentioned earlier, Miller nurtured the overall process.

Regarding the patience a producer must possess, it is hard to imagine a producer having more patience with a musician than what Miller showed to Brian Jones. By the time Beggars Banquet was being recorded, Brian’s emotional and mental condition had deteriorated. Miller describes one session at which Jones showed up with a sitar. Knowing that the instrument would never work on the rootsy blues track they were developing (possibly “Prodigal Son”), Miller nonetheless set Jones up in the studio and had him
play, even though his playing was not being recorded onto the main track. It may be that Miller’s sympathetic attitude towards Jones in such situations played some role in making Jones’s important slide-guitar contribution to “No Expectations” possible.

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Beggars Banquet was released in December 1968 and Miller would go on to produce four more albums with the Stones. He would also go on to produce Spooky Two and Blind Faith in 1969, and Delaney and Bonnie’s On Tour With Eric Clapton in 1970. But there was trouble on the horizon. According to Marianne Faithfull, “Mr. Jimmy” in the lyrics of Let It Bleed’s “You Can’t Always Get What You Want” (1969) referred to Miller and his increasing problem with substance abuse. She writes, “he wasn’t in too bad shape yet, but in Mick’s eyes what Jimmy was doing to himself was horrifying” (Faithfull, 1994, p. 185). By the time of Goats Head Soup (1973), Richards remarks, “we wore out Jimmy Miller, who succumbed to dope” (Richards, 2010, p. 363). After splitting with the Stones, Miller produced many more records, including two classic heavy metal albums with Motörhead, Overkill (1979) and Bomber (1979), and two tracks on Primal Scream’s Screamadelica (1991). Beggars Banquet, however, remains one of his peak successes as a producer.

Notes
1 Richards 2010, p. 235.
2 For a collection of interviews with successful producers, see Massey, 2000. The last decade or so has witnessed a dramatic growth in scholarship on music production. As representative examples, see Frith and Zagorski-Thomas, 2012; Burgess, 2013; Zagorski-Thomas, 2014.
3 Bill Wyman notes that Miller was someone “whom we all rated highly as a producer” (1997, p. 493).
4 Taylor’s remarks are quoted in Dawson, 2011, pp. 93–94.
5 Burgess, in fact, cites George Martin as his representative example of the collaborative type (2013, p. 15).
6 Miller’s half-sister is noted journalist Judith Miller.
7 “Incense” was released on Brit Records (W1-1004) in 1965, but also on Fontana. The US release was on Orbit Records. Because of Miller’s ties to the Spencer Davis Group, a rumor circulated that the lead vocals were sung by Stevie Winwood, though this is doubtful.
8 Like Winwood, Wright was managed by Chris Blackwell and signed to Island Records. As Blackwell’s go-to producer, Miller was accordingly assigned to Spooky Tooth.
9 For a fuller account of Wright’s experience with Miller, see Wright, 2014, pp. 48–69. Miller would go on to produce Spooky Tooth’s second album, Spooky Two (released in March 1969), though he is not credited as a songwriter on this record.
10 For Miller’s discussion of his time with the Stones, see Buskin, 1999. Interviews with Miller are scarce and so the interview appearing in Buskin’s book has tended to be widely quoted.
11 Keith Richards (2010, p. 236) specifically mentions “Gimme Some Lovin’” and “I’m a Man” in his remarks about why he and Miller were so musically compatible.
Miller and Kramer remembered this differently. Miller claims that this technique was first used for “Street Fighting Man,” not for “Jumpin’ Jack Flash.” See Buskin, 1999, p. 129, pp. 135–136. For Richards’s account of these sessions, see Richards, 2010, pp. 239–240. The “Street” sessions began in May and the ones for “Jumpin’” had been in March, so Kramer’s memory is likely the more reliable one. For session dates, see Elliott, 2012, pp. 98–99, 101–102.