

The Beatles' and Rolling Stones' early albums are supposedly of historical importance (PLEASE PLEASE BE PLEASE important? Who knew?), but they now sound primitive and are valuable only as the nascent stage of fascinating careers. These albums are also marred by white-bread versions of r&b covers. The Stones were especially clumsy here, tackling the likes of "Under the Boardwalk," "My Girl" and "Pain in my Heart." Because the Beatles were more pop-oriented and did less covers, their earlier stuff stands up better. It didn't take the band long at all to produce a massive canon of memorable singles and by 1966's REVOLVER they'd eclipsed all competition.

That same year the Stones released their strongest album to date in AFTERMATH, but before the glorious quartet of BEGGARS BANQUET, LET IT BLEED, STICKY FINGERS and EXILE ON MAIN STREET they'd usually seemed like a second-rate Beatles. Though releasing many fine singles, they were clumsier innovators, inferior singers and basically just seemed less talented. Left-field albums like the Beatle-esque BETWEEN THE BUTTONS and a SGT. PEPPER attempt, THEIR SATANIC MAJESTIES REQUEST were odd departures from the r&b they'd been developing.

While the Stones veered all over the road, the Beatles logically progressed from one album to the next. 1967's SGT. PEPPER'S LONELY HEARTS' CLUB BAND is one of rock's more overrated albums, which says more about the absurd claims made on its behalf than about its quality. It was easily rock's most innovative work, and though it hasn't aged well, the band's extraordinary songwriting is present in abundance. MAGICAL MYSTERY TOUR, a mish-mash, elaborated on the ideas set forth on PEPPER, sometimes with dazzling results. The Beatles then discarded the lushness of PEPPER and released THE WHITE ALBUM, an earthy, varied and tuneful album. Clocking in at over 90 minutes, it could use an editor, but still stands as one of their best. Their last true album, ABBEY ROAD is the full realization of everything they'd experimented with, featuring an ambitious pop symphony and passionate, raw rock. Their final album, LET IT BE, was a bumpy combination of over-produced balladry and live-recorded rock 'n' roll. Though a bit of a mess, it exudes a casual brilliance and has an unfinished, homey appeal. THE BEATLES MASTERS volumes 1 and 2 are singles compilations. The second is superb.

1968's BEGGARS BANQUET, the Stones discarded the experimentation they'd been struggling with and released a raw, dark album of blues, country and rock. The follow-up, LET IT BLEED, is less consistent but features some of their greatest music. Had they substituted "Honky Tonk Women" for "Country Honk," it could have been their masterwork.

The Stones' first album with Atlantic, STICKY FINGERS, featured new member Mick Taylor, an Eric Clapton-ish guitarist. Their playing raised to a new level; STICKY features gorgeous, string-laden balladry and seemed incapable of before and the raunchy guitar rock by which they've come to be remembered (and recycled). Their next album, EXILE ON MAIN STREET, was even better, a stunning album that saw them defining r&b, country and soul as their own. It is their best album and the only one either act produced.

That, only moments on solid albums recall past glories. The art of the ballad seemed to desert them, though they could still get across the up-tempo stuff. With each album they've lost spirit, to the point where their recent material bears only a superficial resemblance to their prime music.

The Beatles' solo music is even more spotty than the Stones' post-EXILE albums. John Lennon's THE WALKING BEATLES OSTINO BAND is excellent, and IMAGINE and DOUBLE FANTASY are fine. George Harrison's ALL THINGS MUST PASS is exhilaratingly bloated, while Wings are best experienced through their singles with THE WINGS GREATEST HITS.