

FLYING THE RED EYE WITH KEITH RICHARDS

“Pleased to meet you. Hope you guess my name.”

Rolling Stones “Sympathy For The Devil”

Airports bustle with activity during the day. But after 10 p.m., they’re bleak, deserted tombs. The only people stirring are cleaning crews and road-weary travelers...like me. We wander aimlessly around airports until it’s time to line up with other zombie travelers.

It had been a long week of back-to-back meetings in San Francisco. I grew up in the Bay Area, and it still feels like home. But I left it behind years ago to set off on a radio career that bounced me around the country. A few months earlier, I had accepted a job with MTV Networks and moved my family to the suburbs of New York City. More on that later. For now, I just wanted to board the plane and sleep across America.

I rarely fly overnight. But in August of 1993, I booked a red-eye flight to JFK, cashed in some frequent flier miles and upgraded to first class. Just before midnight, I was among the first to board a DC-10 bound for New York. I tossed my bag into the overhead bin and plopped down in my window seat. With nobody to climb over me, I squashed the pillow against the head rest, pulled a blanket over my head, and settled in for an uninterrupted snooze.

At least that was my plan.

As the flight attendants were closing the cabin door, I heard some commotion up front. People were buzzing that a celebrity was getting on board. Oblivious, I closed my eyes and tried to fall asleep. I heard a distant voice say, "Some rock star is getting on the plane." I didn't think much of it. Then, I sensed someone putting a bag under the seat next to me and settling in. I straightened up, turned to my left, opened one eye...and found myself nose-to-nose with Keith Richards. Keith looks a bit ragged on his best days. But at midnight, illuminated by the fluorescent glare of airplane lighting, the man looked like death warmed over. Dressed in a fur coat and clutching a walking stick with a skull on top, the legendary Rolling Stones guitarist shot me a look that said, "Don't fuck with me." I managed a smile and said hello.

I am fortunate to have met many famous musicians. But they don't get any cooler than Keith Richards. If you're a Stones fan, you favor either Mick Jagger or Keith Richards. I'm a Keith guy. He's not just a rock star, he's an icon—an unvarnished genius. The man wrote the book on rock & roll decadence. He is the international spokesman for partying out of bounds. When you Google "party animal," Keith owns the top three positions.

And on this night, Keith Richards lived up to his reputation.

While I was exhausted and ready to sleep across America, Keith was just getting revved up. To him, the night time is the right time. He was wide awake and rarin' to go. I could barely keep my eyes open, but with this rare opportunity, I forced myself to stay awake. How often do you get five-and-a-half uninterrupted hours with a Rolling Stone? The plane's interior lights were off and everyone else on the plane was asleep. Keith and I talked quietly in the darkness, under the

glow of a TV monitor playing a Stallone movie. Occasionally I'd drift off only to wake and find Keith staring at me, his arms folded. Like he was insulted that I wasn't keeping him company.

Keith and I chatted about everything from music to American politics to living in Westport, Connecticut (the home of Paul Newman, Martha Stewart and Michael Bolton). As it turned out, Keith and I lived less than ten miles apart. We talked about all things music. Keith's a huge blues fan who reveres the old, black bluesmen and talked about their influence on the Stones' early songs. He is a musician's musician who loves playing live, recording and touring. I got the impression that Keith's more excited about hitting the road than Mick. But whenever I brought up the Rolling Stones, he changed the subject.

Keith Richards normally speaks in a loose, sloppy style that can be difficult to understand. Mix in a thick British accent and several stiff drinks and I only caught about 80 percent of what he said. A phrase like "oh, I don't know" sounded like "awwldunno." More than anything, I discovered that Keith is an easygoing guy who doesn't get too stressed over life's obstacles. And there is wisdom in all of those wrinkles. Richards is deceptively sharp and insightful, much smarter than he lets on. He is one of the least pretentious people I've met. It was refreshing to find no star attitude or arrogance. He is who he appears to be, relaxed and spontaneous.

I don't want to imply that Keith drank the entire way to New York. But he kept our flight attendant hopping. I lost count of how many drinks he had. The remarkable thing is, it didn't faze him! Richards never seemed drunk. By now, his liver must be pickled.

The pilot came on the speaker to announce our descent into New York and that the local time was 7 a.m. Keith laughingly kidded, "I'm a morning person. But I don't keep the same morning hours as you."

As we prepared to land at JFK, Keith turned toward me with a devilish look on his face. He asked, "Would you mind walking off the plane with me? Just until we get into the terminal."

"Of course," I said. "We're pals."

Richards and I waited until everyone got off the plane before heading down the jetway. He gave me a heads up, "There's probably some Stones fans waiting for me. They just want autographs."

"At 7 a.m.?" I asked.

"Yeah. Stones fans have spotters in the airports. When they see me board in San Francisco, they put out the word that I'm flying to New York on flight number such and such. So, stay with me while I finish signing their stuff, then pull me away like we've got to go."

"No problem, Keith," I responded, honored to be his companion and co-conspirator.

As we entered the terminal at JFK, about twelve fans approached Keith, each holding up a guitar for him to sign. He was friendly and accommodating as he talked with each person and signed everyone's guitar. The fans were thrilled to get an autograph from one of the all-time greats. As we reached the last guy in line, Keith took the guitar in his hands and signed his name.

Or so I thought.

When I looked over his shoulder, I noticed that he didn't sign "Keith Richards" on the guitar. He signed *my* name instead!!

Before anyone noticed that their precious instruments had been defaced (and devalued), I hustled Keith away.

“What was that about?” I asked.

Richards laughed. “Look, I will do anything for my fans. But those people just want my autograph so they can sell it on-line. They’re not real fans.”

Keith continued, “I know that I’ll run into them in airports. So, whenever I travel, I find someone like you and ask them to walk with me into the airport. Then when I get off the plane and people hand me things, I sign my escort’s name, not mine.” Keith confided, “I learned that one from Mick!”

With that, Keith Richards spotted his driver and headed out into the night, and I haven’t seen him since.

I must apologize to those people who are wondering why Keith Richards signed my name on their expensive guitars... in indelible black ink, no less. Your friends will never believe that Keith really did autograph your guitar. But as the song goes, *“You can’t always get what you want. But if you try sometimes, you just might find, you get what you need.”*