

Fortunate Son: The Art of Ronnie by David Wilson *Value Rich Magazine*, October 25-26, 2006



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Ronnie Wood's legendary career as a rock musician spans 40 years, with the last 30 years in the Rolling Stones, much of that time he has had a tandem career as a visual artist. He attended art school with the intention of becoming a professional artist and has been producing fine art for exhibition since the early 1980's.

Early in his art career, he was dismissed by some critics as a rock-star dabbling in art, but his paintings and print editions of portraits, landscapes and

animals have developed a devoted following. Wood has been commissioned for a Royal Academy of Arts show and has exhibited at the Museum of Modern art in Sao Paulo, Brazil.

A Ronnie Wood original sketch can bring in excess of \$10,000. His paintings sell in the high six figures, but have topped \$1 million. His print editions debut between \$1,600 and \$3,000 but then climb to \$15,000 or better on the secondary market.

One could easily say that the multitasking musician was born under a fortunate star that bestowed special gifts on him. But he sees talent in a different light. "I think a lot of people are born with it but they are too shy to show it," said Wood during a recent conversation with ValueRich magazine. "They think, 'everyone can do this.' And then as they get older, they realize, 'Oh, I am different after all. It's all about how you individually develop what you can do. And then sure enough, you can do what you never thought you could.'"



Time and Place

Ronnie Wood was born in a western suburb of London, England, in June 1947. It was the right place at the right time. London would be the breeding ground for wave after wave of cultural change in music, fashion and art as Wood was growing up.

(Left) *Abstract Tree*, acrylic on canvas, 30" x 37"

Wood was the youngest of three brothers. His musically talented and artistic older brothers each brought different musical influences into their home and then went on to build successful careers as commercial artists. "They were very fine graphic artists," says Wood. "They would do all the advertising art by hand for the newspapers. So, when I was growing up, I thought my brothers were very famous, because I'd see drawings that they'd done in fine detail reproduced in the newspapers for advert. Art was their livelihood – and so was music, funny enough."

Activities in the Wood household revolved in equal parts around music and art. Friends would gather in a back room filled with musical instruments to jam and practice. "My brothers were eight and ten years older than me, so when I was little, I just copied whatever they did. If they played the guitar or drums or saxophone, I would do the same. If they drew, I would draw. And then they would correct me – they'd give me pointers and I'd listen."



(Left) *Mick With Harmonica*, Screenprint 19 1/2" x 27 3/4"

A crossroad in careers

Both Ted and Art went to nearby Ealing Art College. Ronnie eventually followed his brothers, but unlike them, he did not end up with an art career. He wanted to become a scenery painter in the film industry but was frustrated by difficulties breaking into the profession because of the unions. Fortunately, he had a backup career that developed very nicely due to the musical influences of his brothers.

The oldest brother, Ted, had a skiffle band called Candy Bison. Skiffle, based on American washboard or Jug band jazz, was the rage in England during the 1950's. Many early British rock bands had their beginnings in skiffle – among them The Quarry Men, which later evolved into The Beatles. Wood's first public gig was playing washboard with Ted's band at the age of 10.

In the early 1960's, two German promoters created the American Folk Blues Festival to tour Europe, and over the next couple of years American blues artists such as Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, T-Bone Walker, Lightnin' Hopkins, John Lee Hooker and Otis Rush became big celebrities. Ironically, these same names were virtually unknown in the United States at the time; due to segregation, they rarely performed for white audiences or received radio airtime. The tours energized a legion of young British Musicians, among them Ronnie's brother Art. He introduced Ronnie to the blues, and the back room of the Wood house began to pulse with a backbeat.



Rhino, screenprint, 14 1/8" x 19 3/4"

Wood used to rush home from school to watch an afternoon bandstand show on the family's black-and-white TV. One new band he particularly liked was named after lyrics from a Muddy Waters song—The Rolling Stones. Wood used to say to his mother, "I'm going to be in that band."

Wood's art training at Ealing Art College was a complete departure from his childhood quest to draw and paint scenes perfectly. "While I was in college says Wood, "I was doing action painting and abstracts. The teacher would say, "OK, you can do what you want; I'm leaving now. But if you want my advice ride this bicycle all over this canvas." It was about freedom of expression. You weren't forced to do anything, but my curiosity would lead me to try anyway."

Like his older brothers, Wood played in bands while in school and afterward. By the time he was 20 years old he was playing bass with his very close friend Rod Stewart in former Yardbirds guitarist Jeff Beck's band.

Wood quickly found his place in the burgeoning British rock scene. He even shared a Holland Park flat with Jimi Hendrix for a while. "When I was shacking up with Hendrix," says Wood, "I used to think, 'Wow, I wish I could play guitar like that!' I mean you might jam with him, but you'd think, 'Fuckin' hell, he's SO good – unbelievable.' I was playing bass at the time, and he'd always tell everyone else to stop. He'd say, 'Come on, let the bass player play.' I would do my best. And he'd really love it. And because he would share the limelight it made me better.



Jimi and Me at the Scene Club NY

"I think that kind of give-and-take spreads on to the art world as well. I like to jam with other artists. Not that I do it that often, but the few times that I've done it – with Sebastian Kruger in the studio, my brother-in-law Paul, and my two brothers, Art and Ted – whenever we've jammed on the painting, it's turned out really great because they take care of the tiny details when I would do a greater part of the whole thing."

Wood and Stewart left Beck's band and joined the Faces. When lead singer and guitarist Steve Marriott quit for six years they co-wrote many of the songs for the Faces and Stewart's solo albums.

The two remained close even though tension grew between Stewart and the rest of the band due to his meteoric rise to solo popularity. Then, once again, Wood happened to be in the right place at the right time.

One night at a party, Wood was sitting with Rolling Stones Guitarist Mick Taylor and singer Mick Jagger, when Taylor leaned over and told Jagger he was leaving the band. Jagger asked Wood to be Taylor's replacement on the spot. Wood didn't want to desert his friends Stewart and the Faces, so he declined. The Stones auditioned several guitarists but Keith Richards was convinced that Wood was the right guy. Meanwhile, things had come to loggerheads between Stewart and Faces. Wood collaborated in the studio on several Stones songs and, in 1975 formally joined the band. His prediction had come true.



Ronnie Wood's Studio at Sandymount in County Kildare, Ireland

Ancient form of weaving

When Richards and Wood play together, they weave the notes around each other. Structure disappears as they fluidly trade off musical roles – one taking the lead melody, the other playing rhythm; one playing the high notes, the other the low notes. They play off of each other's cues, creating something entirely new.

Wood likens the serendipitous nature of his playing with Keith to his art. “Keith’s original term for it was ‘the Ancient Form of Weaving,’” says Wood, “and we still do it. We really get off on it. It changes every show. It’s always different. That’s the great thing about the music. That’s why we still do it. And the great thing about painting is that you never really achieve what you want to do. You might achieve something on one painting, but it only makes you want to do another painting to take it further – to see what you can do. Stepping into the unknown and the absurd – I love it!”

On the other hand, Wood views music as collaborative art and his painting as a solo gig. “I’m a Gemini, it feeds both of my directions,” he says, “I pretty much love to tour musically and also get a chance to show off my solo work with the painting.”

Quest for new expression

When talking to Wood about his art, the theme continually returns to his quest for new discoveries. “I’m experimenting with how far I can take it once more,” says Wood. “I’ve been studying all around the museums in Paris and Berlin and seeing how the old boys did it. I’m seeing them in a whole different light now.”



Conversation Piece

In his studio at his county Kildare, Ireland farm Sandymount, where he also breeds prize Irish racing horses, Wood returns to some of his favorite subjects – the local landscape, horses, and his rock memories – to explore new techniques. “One of my favorite ways of painting that I dabble with these days is to put my brush on the end of a pool cue, like

Matisse used to do, to paint from a distance. You see these old photographs of Matisse with his extended brushes, and Picasso, when he was doing Guernica, used the long-distance approach, as well. I often get a small photograph in my left hand and then reproduce it on a big scale on the wall. It's great – the simpler the lines, the better. I get a lot of enjoyment out of that, and I find that it really releases a lot of the frustrations. I'm very pleased with the results. It comes out just as I want it – sometimes," he laughs.

Wood will have some major new pieces touring the United States at several gallery events coinciding with the Stones' Bigger Bang tour this fall. Gallery shows are planned for New York, Los Angeles, Las Vegas, and San Francisco, with additional possible locations to be announced. At a time when rumors have once again surfaced that this tour may be the Rolling Stones' last, Wood once again seems to be in the right place at the right time, with growing interest in his art. But for him, the timing is incidental.

"It is hard to put into words," he says, "but I think the key is longevity. You keep experimenting without ever actually reaching perfection. I hear songs we did in the seventies and I think, 'oh no, it sounds like a rough sketch.' But now I'm part of it in the present. This is what's happening now, and it's exciting to see if it can get better. That's what happens musically and artistically. You are always striving to get better. And it always does." **VR**